

FLY AWAY PAUL

To Sorel, just out of a Paris finishing school, a career on the stage was the only possible future. Her parents, however, did not share her enthusiasm and, rather than cause grief to her invalid mother, she accepted the proposal of an old friend of the family, Luke Harding, on the understanding that he would help her to become an actress after they were married. But on the way to the South of France following the wedding, Luke was seriously injured in a car crash and, when they were finally able to continue their honeymoon, her husband, now husband in name only, had become sullen, difficult, and bitterly possessive.

Escaping from the oppressive atmosphere of the sick-room to the secluded, unfrequented beach near their pension, Sorel revelled in the sun for a brief hour each day before hastening back to Luke's side—until, one morning, she met Paul Maxwell. Paul was a theatrical producer, but the passionate love Sorel soon felt for him swamped all other desires but the urgent need of having him near. Her life was now one with his and yet irrevocably bound up with Luke, who was completely dependant on her. She tried for a time to live two lives—but the impossible situation could not last . . .

FLY AWAY PAUL

by
JOAN PEPPER



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To Denis

Old Nursery Rhyme

Two little dickie birds sat upon a wall,
One named Peter, one named Paul,
Fly away Peter, fly away Paul,
Come back Peter, come back Paul.

PART I

'Sorel, what will you do when you leave?'

'I shall go on the stage, darling, and become a famous actress. You'll both pay enormous sums for stalls to come and watch me. I'll be a tragic Phèdre, a pathetic Ophelia, a beautiful Trilby. After the show I'll write you little perfumed notes, and thank you for your bouquets. I shall marry an actor . . .'

'But actresses are frightfully Lesie, Sorel!'

'Ssh, please don't interrupt, we'll be as famous as the Lunts, but that will come much later. Sometimes when I am quite old, I'll meet you all at the Savoy Grill for lunch . . .'

'The Ivy, darling.'

'You'll all look your age, some of you may even have babies you can't leave behind or husbands who bore you to tears, but I'll float in looking eighteen—actually I'll probably be forty—and beautifully free, surrounded by adoring young men whom I'll dispense amongst you like so much chaff. Every few minutes a waiter will call me to the telephone; so tiresome, you know, but my public! At the end of lunch I'll smile very, very sweetly, sipping the last of my champagne, and then being vague, artistic and forgetful, I'll drift off to a matinée leaving you all to settle the bill.'

'You're not serious?'

I tied my dressing-gown cord tightly round my waist and began to cream my face. The smell of nail varnish, face creams and brilliantine mingled with the sweet smell of talcum powder. There were three of us in the room, all aged seventeen, at our finishing school in Paris. It was strictly forbidden to speak English so our voices were lowered to a conspiratorial whisper.

I looked at Cynthia sitting cross-legged on her bed, a lipstick poised like a dart of poison between her parted lips.

'That colour is much too orange,' I whispered tartly. 'Of course I'm serious. My father is full of old-fashioned ideas about girls going on the stage, but I shall beguile him, and if that won't work I'll bewitch him. "In this year nineteen hundred and thirty-six," he'll begin, or, "When I was your age," forgetting that he was a boy anyway and that it's not nearly so shocking for a girl to go on the stage. While he's talking I'll begin to recite Portia's speech, "The quality of mercy", and he'll be so carried away that with tears in his eyes he'll kiss me on my cool immaculate brow and say, "Bless you my child, I knew you would never let the side down!"'

'Sorel, do you really need hormones at seventeen?'

'It says on the pot "suitable for any type of skin".'

'It also says "to allay crêpiness and crow's feet"'. I really don't think it applies.'

'How do you know? It's written in French.'

'My mother uses it, and it's more or less the same. Darling, do you think I should wax off my moustache, it's very dark?'

'It'll be worse when it's grey!'

'Sweets, don't be so sadistic.'

'If you wax it the first man you kiss will have stubble trouble. It grows very bristly and sticks out.'

'I shall never kiss a man,' whispered Cynthia demurely. She was small, dark and very pretty, with a fashionably affected voice. She wiped off the orange lipstick with a tissue.

Marion, red-headed and dreamy, said,

'Then you'll never get married,' as one announcing the death of a dear one.

'Oh, but I shall,' said Cynthia. 'I'm going to marry Giles. Sorel, pass me the nail file.'

'And who is Giles?'

'My first cousin. You know, the one I told you about.'

He's tall, dark and going up to Oxford.'

'But, my darling, that's incest.'

'What is?'

'Marrying your first cousin. You can't possibly. You'll have moronic children drooling after you, and regret it for the rest of your life. Besides, if you marry him you'll have to kiss him.'

'No. He kisses me.'

'Just the same I should leave the waxing alone. It's very painful.'

'I always think Giles notices it. His eyes seem positively riveted.'

'It's not that, darling, don't you worry.'

'Sorel, what'll you call yourself? Your stage name, I mean.'

'Just Sorel. It will look good in neon lighting above Gladys Cooper's, and much more impressive.'

'It's a funny name.'

'My father called me after his favourite mare. I think he was disappointed I wasn't a foal. My mother was unable to bring it off that year.'

'Ssh, I hear Mademoiselle.'

'She creeps, that woman. She has all the sliminess of frogs. And such big pores! I must lend her my hormones.'

'Good-night, Marion.'

'Good-night.'

'Good-night, Sorel. Future star!'

Picking up my suitcase I went to the barrier. The Blue Train exhaled its last blast of smoke and spoilt the rhythm of my hammering heart. The crowd surged on all sides like huge black waves; only the flowers in a corsage, or nodding in some Paris hat, brought relief like white horses to the dark moving mass. I let it carry me through the barrier, my feet scraping the top of the platform, my ticket brushing the hand of the collector before he grasped it.

Outside the waves broke up and dispelled into separate entities, leaving me alone and isolated, a girl with a mind, and a body, with which to contend. I felt uncovered like a hermit crab without its shell, a chameleon without its protective colouring. For the first time since leaving Paris I missed my companions. It was a relief when in the distance I saw my father. He was standing under the clock just as he said he would. His monocle fixed, he was glaring fiercely into the middle distance. I hurried towards him, towards his protection. I would lose myself against the serge of his coat; his arm encircling me, I would feel safe.

A man, a fellow traveller, came up and raised his hat.

'Are you being met?' he asked, looking round.

'Yes, yes, of course,' I answered, barely seeing him. 'My father is over there under the clock.'

'May I see you again?' he asked, taking in my father at a glance. I hesitated. He had been pleasant enough to talk to on the train, where for one wonderful chimera I had grown up, but now I no longer needed him. My father saved my embarrassment. Seeing me, his face had lit up, his eyes, cold and piercing in repose, had warmed suddenly like a Mediterranean sea, and with long military strides he came hurrying towards me. My escort forgotten, I ran into his arms.

'Sorel!' he exclaimed. 'Little Sorel, well, well, bless my soul, little Sorel.' He gazed at me with delighted surprise. 'You're a big girl. A young lady now.'

I tucked my arm in his. Pleased at his pleasure, I had nothing to say. Luggage was collected, a taxi called. In my excitement life seemed indeed wonderful at this moment.

'And what,' said my father, leaning towards me in the taxi so that I could smell the delicious Turkish tobacco and feel the roughness of his sleeve against my cheek. 'And what does my little girl want to do now? What plans have we made for the future?' He chuckled. 'Hunting? Dancing? Fencing? And, Sorel, they have opened a new

golf course at Beaminster. It'll be lovely to have you at home for a while.'

I had a fleeting vision of a page in the *Tatler* given up to the General and his daughter engaged in these pursuits before I said very meekly, but confidently, 'I want to go on the stage, Daddy.' The idea was so real to me that I forgot it might be new to my father. At school I had conceived it. In Paris it had blossomed and flourished in the exalted atmosphere of the *Comédie française* and the *Théâtre de Champs-Élysées*. My father was the last person to know of my ambitions. Much as I loved him there had been no gaps in my education in which to build up our relationship. School holidays had come and gone, filled in with dentist's appointments, tonsils removal, riding, skating, clothes marking and occasional parties. There were flaws in such consistency: youth passes and the old are left bereft and bewildered, saying of their young, 'I never got to know them.'

Now as a reward for all this high-powered efficiency I heard my father take a sharp intake of breath and then sigh sadly. As we went past a street lamp I saw his profile set and immobile as though graven on a sarcophagus. His lips scarcely moving, he said, 'We'll discuss it again when you've been at home for a bit. After all, you scarcely know your own neighbourhood.'

'I know I'll never change my mind,' I said firmly, and changed the subject quickly. The thought that he might say 'No' finally was unbearable. I would wait and then in a more vulnerable moment ask him again.

'How's Mummy?' I asked.

'About the same.' Suddenly weary, my father rubbed his forehead. 'I found a new quack for her, but they're all the same. Promise so much and do so little. The extraordinary phenomenon is that she appears to be quite happy; never worries at all when they shake their heads over her. This new fellow wants her to go and take the baths in some place in Germany, but she says it's too much

effort, that she will miss her spring flowers. Seems quite happy to drift.'

'I think she's always happy inside,' I said softly. To me there was something so spiritually good and beautiful about my mother that the normally strong and healthy paled in comparison. Rude health seemed common and vulgar. Most of my life she had lain an invalid on a sofa or in bed. The sofa, the epitome of good health, became an adventure, a journey which she undertook with all the gaiety of the adventuress. The bed she accepted as her natural habitat.

'Those wretched headaches,' expostulated my father, thumping his stick violently on the floor of the taxi. How often in my childhood had I heard my father say, 'Your mother has one of her wretched headaches,' or, looking at her angrily as though he would shake it out of her, 'Not another of your wretched headaches, my dear?'

As a small girl I had found her presence on the sofa restful. Unlike my busy and preoccupied nannie, and later my governess, she was always there; always there to console over a broken toy, to hold a baby bird, to distract me from a scratched knee with her embroidery silks and her coloured ribbons. In other little girls' houses I would always ask, 'Where's your Mummie?' 'Out,' would come the careless answer. 'Don't you mind?' I would ask, amazed at their indifference. 'No, why should I? She's always out. That's why we have Nannie.' Hiding my surprise, for to me a Nannie, however good, was never the same thing, preoccupied as they always were with their knitting, their 'Woman's W . . .' and their digestions, I prayed like a good Christian that my Mummie might never evolve the need or the desire, or even the health, to flit out of front doors into big limousines, away into a mysterious and secret life of her own. One holiday they swept her away to Zürich for treatment. Inconsolable as I had never been before, I crept into her room and, curling up on the sofa with her soft pink pillow to my face, I wept, smudging the satin with my tears. Later my nurse, finding

me asleep, awoke me and shaking her head said, 'Really, Miss Sorel, I did think that just for once I'd know where not to look for you. Quite ruined the effect of the Bengers, you have!'

Dangling my legs from my mother's bed, I learnt to read. Patiently she spelt the words out for me, 'A for apple, and, Sorel, A for agitate, which is what your legs do to me, darling, every time they kick the bed. Gently, now, gently.' How often a more active mother might have failed me as she never did.

In a childish way I had learnt to protect her from worry, taking my cue from my father. For instance, it would never enter my head to take to her the problem of my future. Once when I had fallen badly out hunting I was brought back half dead in an ambulance. From my stretcher the first thing I saw was my father's anxious face looking down at me. He waved a peremptory hand to the stretcher bearers. 'Not that way,' he said as they began to carry me through the front door. 'You must go through the back door and up to Miss Sorel's room by the back stairs. Another of your mother's wretched headaches,' he explained apologetically to my white and stricken upturned face.

Self-sufficient as my mother was, running as she did a competent household, my presence served only as a distraction, not as a necessity.

For a month after my return from Paris I busied myself with small occupations. I arranged forced lilacs in wedgwood vases; I walked hound puppies until they ate our Yorkshire ham and chased foxes on their own; I spent an agonized hour in the kitchen every morning chewing a slate pencil and extracting uncompromising grunts from a sceptical cook.

'I think, Mrs. Cummins,' I began one morning, having thought about it half the night, 'a *pot-au-feu* would be a good idea to-day.'

'We haven't got one,' said Mrs. Cummins, restless on her chilblains.

'No, you would have to make one.'

'We might manage with the one in the study fireplace, miss, if your father don't mind.'

'One what?'

'A pot of ferns.'

'Oh no, Mrs. Cummins, it's soup!'

'Why ever didn't you say so, miss?'

Mrs. Cummins creaked her corsets, and pushed them down from her surging bosom.

'I'll go and ask Madam,' she would say firmly.

The social life of Dorset did not amuse me. It in no way came up to the life which I had planned for myself. Occasionally a kiss at a dance would momentarily excite me, a good day's hunting would find me radiant: but they were small compensations for the life of the foot-lights, and in between there were the moments of boredom and the feeling of shyness and futility, which left me tongue-tied when I should have been gay and amusing.

'Why don't you register?' said a young man in a dark blue shirt and a midnight blue dinner-jacket. 'And for heaven's sake don't shake hands. It's a sticky habit. Why don't you emulate the Earwig? She's got what it takes.'•

The Earwig, large, heavy-lidded, and wearing a dirty white dress, lifted one corner of her terra-cotta upper lip.

'She's too blonde,' she lisped.

'She looks so approachable but is like ice,' said the young man angrily.

'You should heap coals, darling, positively mountains of coals.'

'There's no spark,' said the young man, looking moodily at the Earwig. I squirmed in my chair. I hated being dissected like a frog. I wondered whether 'to register' meant wearing dirty frocks, too much make-up, and going to bed with all and sundry.

Luke Harding rescued me on this and many similar occasions.

'But darling,' I heard the Earwig lisp as we took the floor, 'they are so frightfully, frightfully psychopathic!'

'What a woman!' said Luke, sawing the air with my arm and resting his feet on mine.

'She's a great success,' I said ruefully.

'Not with me she's not,' said Luke, squeezing my hand, 'though in some extraordinary way I've been inveigled into asking her to come winter-sporting in my party after Christmas. I wish you'd come, Sorel.'

'I expect I could if I'm not already on the stage.'

Luke leant away from me and scrutinized my face. He appeared never to have seen me before.

'The stage! What on earth for?'

'Glamour, foot-lights, exhibitionism!'

'Good Lord!'

'Does it seem repellent to you?'

'No, only a little unnecessary.'

'Unnecessary! Don't you think Sarah Bernhardt or Ellen Terry found it unnecessary?'

'No, but you are different.'

'I like to think I'm not. That I may not be if I'm given the chance.'

'Who would ever think to see you that such unorthodox schemes were seething in you or head? Come winter-sporting and you'll give up all idea of the stage. I never heard such nonsense.'

He whirled me round the floor complacently; he guided my feet on and my conversation away from deep waters. Whilst I smiled I felt like a rock inside, unflinching, determined but secretive. By the end of the dance, whilst my mouth paid lip service, I had decided to go winter-sporting. It would lull my father and see my mother through the winter—a time of year particularly bad for her.

'I'll come,' I told him late at.

'That's a girl!' He bubbled over with plans; he showed me how to telemark in the middle of the dance floor.

'Already I find it easy to act a part,' I thought ruefully, and yet I found being with Luke restful.

He was typical of many pre-war young men within a certain income group. Either they went up to the University and from there the more adventurous joined expeditions to Spitzbergen to write books on the subject afterwards, dubbing themselves 'explorers'; or, like Luke, went without demur into their father's old regiment, wearing their father's old mess jacket, and behaving in very much the same way; going as their fathers had from one physical jerk to another and becoming addicted to cold baths and exercises before breakfast. Beginning to diet for 'fitness' sake and giving it up immediately at the sight of a cold grouse for breakfast.

He went well to hounds, though incapable of understanding the subtleties of hound-craft. He loved his horse out of all proportion to that noble beast's many qualities. On the slightest provocation he took his girl friends round the stables. If one hoped for sweet dalliance amongst the warm-scented hay one was sadly disappointed. After feeling the horse's legs, one stood back with Luke's hand on one's arm gazing at some equestrian wonder in dreamy admiration.

His love and sympathy for women were judged entirely by the proportion of their time given up to pursuing the fox.

'She's a great girl!' meant that she hunted Tuesdays and Thursdays and had the energy to box her horse to a distant meet occasionally on Saturdays, where she would arrive impeccably dressed in a car driven by her patient but scheming mother, who in her turn would extract the last ounce of fun out of the chase by following in her car, leaping out to 'halloo' from every hill-top—whether she saw the fox or not—until she headed the wily little beast blindly and blissfully as she sat munching her sandwiches under a hedge. It always fell to Luke, whose manners were impeccable, to rein in his horse as the irate hunt cavalcaded past, to make her feel, though roughly comfortable about it,

telling her with a certain amount of truth that he would have been shattered had they killed, thus depriving themselves of future sport from old reynard, and that he for one was quite happy feeling the ounces pour off him each time he rose from the saddle.

His whole being was filled with an exuberant zest for life, so that in Switzerland I was to find myself carried along on his waves of enthusiasm. Unimaginative, he plunged into everything wholeheartedly, whether it be friendships with new acquaintances or plunging straight down glacier-like slopes. Where I would pause wondering, weighing up the pros and cons, uncertainly feeling my way, Luke never hesitated. Quickly sensitive to atmosphere, silenced by a cold look, frozen by an unkind word, I enjoyed being carried by Luke's imperviousness. As no great thought was necessary, no conversation deep, or if it was, Luke steered it free again with one shove of his conversational oar, I gave myself up for the time being to the joy of being admired, if not loved; to the fun of being eighteen amongst the snows and the mountains.

When our party, headed by the exotic Earwig, gradually gave up the hazards of ski-ing for the more edifying and warming occupation of drinking *Glühwein* in sun-drenched cafés, Luke and I found ourselves thrown more and more on our own together. If at times I determinedly sat in my room with my Shakespeare on my knee my limbs betrayed me. They trembled with restlessness, they fidgeted and would not be stilled. Outside my window the sun beckoned, the slopes looking smoothly virgin shouted to be conquered. Snapping my book shut, seizing my gloves, I would find Luke, relieved by my appearance, and skating on our skis away we would go, clattering down the village, hounded out by our own excited voices.

'I'm afraid I'm still a lacrosse captain,' I said, laughing, to Luke one day.

'What would you be?' he asked.

'A young intellectual.'

'You're perfect just as you are.'

'I know not what I am,' I said dreamily.

Down the Lauberhorn, for we were at Wengen, we each day broke our yesterday's record. I never competed with Luke but I was good enough to spur him to greater effort. At every fall we laughed; indeed life seemed one huge joke.

One day after a bad fall I came up more slowly than usual, wiping the snow from my eyes and beating it out of my cap. Luke was looking down at me, I thought with some anxiety.

'No bones broken,' I said confidently.

'I think we ought to get married,' said Luke quite out of context and very red in the face.

'Are you proposing?' I asked demurely, the snow melting and stiffening my face.

'I think so.' He thrashed the snow with his ski stick, he drew weird patterns on the surface.

'I feel an awful fool at this sort of thing,' he said.

I wanted to say promptly, 'Please don't,' and tell him of some flaw in me. Of how I could only fail in his world because of this wrongness. That the Sorel who ski-ed and skated was only a temporary one, waiting as I was, cynically enough, until I had burnt out my energies. Afterward the 'I' would develop, so that I would become unrecognizable to him. 'I'm only a false note,' I wanted to tell him, the one you avoid on the piano, or the one the cracked glass gives. But if I told him I knew he would never understand, so instead I climbed to my feet and retrieved my lost ski. I leant on my stick and looked at him thoughtfully.

'I wonder whether you'd be any good at hearing me my parts.'

'Your parts?' asked Luke, astonished, bending and fastening my ski. I touched his hair with the tips of my fingers experimentally.

'I told you. I'm going on the stage.'

'Oh, that nonsense,' said Luke, relieved, straightening his back and thumping his skis on the snow.

'Not such nonsense. I'm deadly serious.'

'Well, perhaps you could do that as well,' said Luke indulgently.

I looked at him intently, straining as though expecting to hear some echo of falseness. I thought, 'What seems so important to me is of no moment to him. He'll forget he ever said those words if we marry.'

'We'll talk about it when you propose to me for the third time,' I said.

'We get on awfully well, Sorel. You're such a good sport.'

'My inclination towards the stage is scarcely sporting.'

'You'll forget it. We'll have such tremendous fun together, Sorel. Have you ever laughed so much with anyone as you have with me the last week or so? We'll ski together, hunt—why, I'll teach you to shoot. Have you ever handled a gun?'

I leant towards him and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

'Don't think about it any more now, Luke. Just look at that view. We were going so fast we didn't have time to admire it.'

He spread his arms, expanded his chest.

'The air,' he said, breathing deeply, 'must be splendid up here, really splendid.'

Our relationship altered very little after this day. Not yet coquette, I failed to use my advantage. When Luke spattered his conversation with 'when we're married's' I affected not to hear him. Unable to visualize conditions under which I would marry him, I did not refuse him definitely but intending to let him down gently I turned our conversations to more controversial subjects. I spoke of the works of Eliot and Auden, of the philosophy of Huxley and Freud. I picked up hints from the Earwig and tried to shock him.

'Do you believe in free love?' I asked innocently, as we skated round the rink to the strains of a Viennese waltz.

'Definitely not,' he replied distastefully. 'Do you?' he remembered to ask.

'I'm not sure. The Earwig does. So do lots of people. Bertrand Russell says . . .'

'Bertrand Russell! Darling, you shouldn't read him yet.'

'Why ever not?'

'You should wait until we're married and we could perhaps read him together. You'll have to teach me about books, and I'll teach you show jumping and things like that. We'll make a marvellous combination.'

'I won't have time.'

'Why ever not?'

'I'll be rehearsing.'

'What? Oh yes of course, but in between . . .'

'May I speak to you, Daddie?'

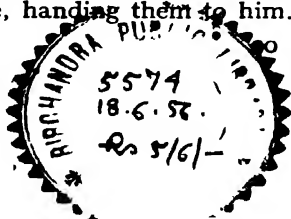
'Of course, my dear, come into my study, and shut the door behind you.' He looked pleased, as though what I had to say was a foregone conclusion.

I followed him into the room, where the sun poured in steady dusty streams through the french windows. Outside, tall acacia trees bloomed, their white flowers opalescent against the blue of the cypresses. A lawn, with stiff yuccas growing at intervals in round brown beds, ran down to a lake, where baby moorhens, their heads like moss roses, floated after their mother.

I sat on the hessian arm of the sofa. Braced up for the moment I felt stiff and unnatural. Taking a deep breath I said quickly,

'Daddie, I still want to go on the stage.'

I looked for surprise, but saw only a sadness. He faced the mantelpiece, filling his pipe, his elbows moving in jerks, his head bleak and unpromising. Slowly he ran his fingers along the top looking for the matches. Seeing some on a little table beside me I seized them and went to his side, handing them to him.



'Do you remember, Daddie?' I asked, looking up into his face eagerly.

'I remember quite well, Sorel.' He looked at me severely as from a great distance. 'I may be old-fashioned, stuffy and all the things you young people call us old fogies, but the idea of your going on the stage appals me. For one thing, I simply have not the time to keep running from here to London to look after you. Your mother must come first.'

'I know, Daddie. Of course I understand that, but I can go into rooms or stay with Cynthia. You've no need to worry about me.'

'Your mother worries about you a great deal.'

'When I'm successful she'll be proud. I promise to make you both proud of me. I'll work so hard.'

'I know you don't mean to be selfish, Sorel, but you must realize what it means to your mother to have you at home. It would kill her if you left to go on the stage.'

I went over to the window and played with the latch. In the bird-bath a sparrow sent out sparks of spray, pin-pricks of light against the moss green lawn. The smoky blue leaves of daffodils stood like sentinels beyond the cypresses and under the tulip tree. The beauty of the composite whole tortured me; ugliness would have soothed, this only frustrated, filling the eye but not the heart.

'I'm not good at home, Daddie. What is the use of a good education unless I use it?'

'Education is never wasted. When you have children you can pass it on to them.'

'And so on, and so on, ad infinitum,' I said wearily. 'Really I can never see the point. I want to use what I may have acquired, not just become a carrier. It's only when someone has the courage to break out of the rut and becomes a specialist that the rut and the occupiers thereof become justified. Otherwise each life is rendered useless by its exact pattern of the one which went before.'

'Do you think yourself special?'

'No, no, but I'm conscious of the rut, and finding it intolerable is surely one step away from it?'

'You surely don't think the fifth row of the chorus have such inflated ideas of themselves? There are other things in life besides kicking your legs in the air, and making an exhibition of yourself. The rut, as you like to term it, has its own compensations, and it takes discipline and a sense of duty to adhere and make a success of the ordinary. You are inclined to dramatize yourself, Sorel. We all do so when young. It buoys us up with false hope. Only later when you look back, you realize how absurd you were. My idea of life was to be a Colonel, and to win glory in a frontier skirmish. Absurd on the face of it!' My father laughed deprecatingly.

'I want to do straight acting,' I said helplessly. The thirty-six years between us seemed unbridgeable. 'I want to act Shaw, Shakespeare, Molière and Racine. It could be a wonderful life,' I added wistfully.

'At the cost of your mother's health! I can't allow it. I'm sorry, Sorel, but that's final.'

'I'll find a way, Daddie.'

'And harm your mother? I hardly think so, Sorel.'

'No, without hurting her at all. I think I'll go and talk to her now.'

'You are not to worry her.'

I smiled at him sweetly and shook my head.

'Later, Sorel,' he said hopefully, 'you'll realize I was right.'

'Yes, Daddie, thank you,' I said demurely. Did he really think he had won the age-old battle? Already ideas were filling my mind, I only needed the privacy of my room for them to crystallize and form. I went and opened the door.

In the hall a figure stepped out of the darkness and made me start. It was Luke waiting for me. Through misted eyes I saw his pink face against the dark panelling. For one crazy moment I pictured his face in place of the bowl of red roses on the table, the roses against the

panelling, velvety and shadowed. His face would make a good centre-piece, I thought hysterically. I brushed past him.

'Sorel,' he said as I reached the foot of the stairs, his hand on the banisters, 'can you play squash with me?'

I ran half-way up the stairs before I leant over and looked at him.

'I see no reason why not,' I cried in vexation. 'Do you?'

I searched his face for something I needed, intently, his face indelibly before me, then not finding it I raced on upstairs without another word and into my mother's room. I flung myself on my knees beside her, my arms round her waist, my face in her eiderdown.

I felt her stroking my hair.

'Don't 'e cry,' she said softly, as she had said so often before. 'Don't 'e cry.'

I remembered I was not to worry her. I sat back on my heels, wiping my eyes. 'It's nothing, darling,' I said, smiling faintly. 'I just get bothered over trifles. Now let me stroke your head.' She touched my cheek gently. 'You are very dear to me, Sorel,' she said. 'A very dear child.'

At a ball at Hurlingham Luke proposed again, this time more determinedly. I was quite ready, had in fact only been waiting for this moment. When he made love to me I found that what I dreaded was something I now had to fasten on to. Life became all at once simplified and I returned his embrace with extortionate passion altogether alien to my actual feelings.

'Darling Sorel. I love you so much.'

'You're very good to me, Luke.' I said it wishfully down the tunnels of the future.

'When shall we get married?'

I plunged. My wrists ice cold, I looked up at him anxiously.

'You remember what you promised me in Switzerland?'

'The same as now, to marry you.'

'And something else as well. That if I married you, you would let me . . .'

'What?'

'You don't remember?' Dismayed, I scarcely had the courage to mention what must have been so trivial to him.

'No, darling, tell me.'

'You said that if I married you, you would let me go on with my stage career.'

'Go on with? But you haven't started.'

'No, but if I marry you I want to begin.'

'Won't marriage be enough?'

'Not yet. You can't probably understand but it's something I must do. I'll only marry you if you agree to this. Will you?'

'Don't let's argue, darling. I'll marry you and half the stage-hands into the bargain if it's the only way to get you.'

In a drawing-room heavily scented with spring flowers Mrs. Harding was sitting knitting her interminable grey wool. Luke, jubilant with joy, rushed in upon her, sending a chiffonier to lurch crazily against the wall. Tactful and nervous I lingered in the dark passage, peering short-sightedly at the old parchment-coloured coaching prints. I was a little afraid of Mrs. Harding; she filled me with a winter's greyness; colour and youth appeared tedious and frivolous beside her; even her body seemed covered with soft grey flesh, though her face had a pale quality like the petal of some exotic flower. No powder dusted its unblemished surface. Her hair was ash grey, but lavendered, and she had grey eyes which warmed to blue like northern skies. When angered or bitter, they could, in their shallow depths, turn to the yellow whiteness of snow. Her mouth which should have been warm and

generous, for she was a tall woman and magnificently built, was small and thin, compressed as though, as each occurrence through life had shocked or repelled her, she had drawn in her lips, sucked them in with a sharp intake of breath. The lips no longer unfolded but remained in the dark cavern of her mouth.

Her life was bounded on one side by her husband, on the other by her son; other people served only as a backcloth to these, her only two relationships. She judged people only as they affected or threatened the solidarity of her family life.

Picking up her ball of knitting wool and throwing it excitedly from palm to palm, Luke said,

'Mum, you'll never guess!' Then as she remained impassive, only disengaging gently the wool from his hands, he blurted, the words tumbling over each other in his eagerness,

'Sorel and I are engaged.'

Afraid of what she might say, not knowing that I was eavesdropping, I walked into the room in time to catch the flicker of disapproval which momentarily transfigured her face. So fleeting was the look, before she rose, spilling the wool, her bag, glasses and all the paraphernalia of an elderly woman, that I could not be sure of the evidence of my eyes. I only saw a Mrs. Harding clasping her son close to her in one broad enveloping gesture, a happy mother sharing his pleasure. Later she turned to me and put her cheek against mine, squeezing my arm.

'Darlings,' she said, 'darlings, what a shock to give me.'

'It was a shock to me,' said Luke, laughing. 'I never thought she would.'

Mrs. Harding turned and tapped Luke on the chest.

'She's very young, you know, Luke. Do you think that you are capable of looking after her properly?'

'You'll help me,' said Luke, putting an arm round each of us. He kissed us both on our cheeks, I felt a moment of disquiet: I did not relish the idea of being looked after by Mrs. Harding.

'By the way,' he said, making his voice casual, 'Sorel wants to be an actress.'

'And your dear mother,' said Mrs. Harding, ignoring for the moment his disclosure, 'what does she feel about this?'

'She's very glad,' I said. I did not tell her of the amazing effect it had had on my mother. I could not at this moment add fuel to her vanity. I did not tell her that for the last few days my mother had walked round her room, on feet unused to walking, trembling valiant feet which weakened, turning to liquid, and deposited her more than once a helpless heap on the floor; but that whilst she was able to remain upright she had opened drawers with nervous fingers, thrown back the lids of chests, pulling out bales of lace, of gaily coloured taffetas, *crêpe de Chines* in all the softest hues, button boxes filled with buttons of silver and ebony and tiny mother of pearl, silk and wools in neat regimented skeins; and that half suffocated by the fumes of camphor and cedarwood she had set to, at once, to make my trousseau.

'Luke,' said Mrs. Harding, 'your father is in the orchard. Be a dear and fetch him. We must tell him the good news.'

Luke gone, Mrs. Harding settled herself comfortably into her armchair. She tapped the chair beside her, but I wandered round the room at a loss for words. On an incidental table there was a picture of Luke as a baby, with the artistically arranged shawl round his nakedness: it had all the artificiality of a studio portrait. One hand, small and plump, was grasping the air, hopefully, towards the mythical dicky bird. I picked it up and gazed at it intently, looking for signs of the future Luke.

'He has a very bad temper.' Mrs. Harding's voice startled me. 'Yes,' she said seeing my surprised face, 'he's a dear obstinate boy. It's his only fault, so we mustn't be too hard on him, but as a baby he would often work himself into a convulsion. Of course he's learnt to control it.'

I smiled bleakly at her; she was looking at me with all

the indulgence of a cat about to catch a mouse. She doesn't like me, I thought, undismayed. I had never expected her to welcome our engagement, in fact had not thought about her at all, and felt that on the whole she had put a good face on it.

'I'll try not to drive his temper too far,' I said, putting down the photograph.

'So you want to go on the stage and marry Luke,' said Mrs. Harding, bending and picking up her knitting. She really meant, 'So you want to have your cake and eat it too.'

Embarrassed I picked up another cherubic and becurled Luke, this time in a smock, but showing an unnecessary amount of turkish towelling.

'I'd like a baby like that,' I exclaimed.

'Hardly, if you're going to be an actress,' she said coldly.

'Actresses do have babies. Lots of them. There's no reason why not.'

'I don't quite see how you can be with Luke's regiment and on the stage?'

'So long as Luke is with the regiment,' I began flippantly and stopped. 'We'll work it out,' I said in tones which brooked no further interference.

At that moment Colonel Harding came in with Luke. A dear inoffensive little man, the subtleties in life passed sublimely over his head. I was already very fond of him. His passion was his garden, and a new plant or a beautiful flower would leave him trembling with excitement. He asked nothing more in life than to be left in peace to tend his garden.

I could see as he came into the room with little jerky steps that he was tense with joy.

'My dear, my dear!' he cried, going and kissing his wife—the merest peck at her cheek. 'I knew we would bring it off.'

'We?' said Mrs. Harding.

'But of course "we"'. Who else has encouraged with patience and fortitude all these months?'

'It was quite unpremeditated I assure you,' said Mrs. Harding a little coldly.

'Unpremeditated my foot,' said the Colonel, playfully pinching her cheek. 'Who else is such a natural judge of matters? Why, my dear, I always say nothing is worth starting unless you say it will be a success. You always said this would be, and it is.'

'I don't remember . . .' began Mrs. Harding.

'But the perfect cross. Quite perfect. I cannot think of a better combination. Just think what we may get by next year.'

I looked a little bashfully at my shoes. Heavens knew where this conversation was leading us.

'Then you approve?' said Mrs. Harding coldly.

'So will you when you've seen it. Come into the garden now, my dears, and let me show you.'

'Hubert,' said Mrs. Harding, daylight dawning, 'what are you talking about?'

'But my scillas, darling. The first one just out and the most perfect deep red that you've seen in your life. The first successful cross in this country.'

'Then you haven't heard about Sorel and Luke,' said Mrs. Harding faintly.

'No, what have the rogues been up to?'

'They're engaged, Hubert.'

'Are they, by Jove! Good, excellent, I always said Sorel was the best girl across country, and apparently Luke thinks so too. Fine! Now come and see my scillas.'

When I was leaving later in the evening, Luke led me into the shadow of the mulberry tree. 'Now he is going to kiss me,' I thought resignedly. Since my enthusiasm at Hurlingham I neither liked nor disliked being kissed by Luke. It left me, I found, strangely unaffected. I could think my own thoughts and at the same time emulate enthusiasm. Sometimes coming out of a trance I thought that perhaps his kisses were crude and unskilled, but I had no experience and little to judge them by. I imagined in an immature way that it would all be much better when we

were married, though I had only the faintest conception of what marriage meant. My parents had not thought it their bounden duty to tell me, and the pickings I had had from my girl friends were strangely unsavoury. Being fastidious I preferred not to think of what they had divulged to me. Now I steeled myself to receive Luke's kiss, but he only put his hands on my shoulders.

'Darling,' he said, 'Mum wants to talk to me about something. I'll come over and see you after supper. The old lady seems a bit burnt up about something.'

'She doesn't like me,' I said quickly.

'Who wouldn't like such a poppet?' laughed Luke. 'No, it isn't that, darling, don't you worry.'

His hands began to slide down my shoulders.

'You'll tell me, Luke, won't you?' I said, pressing against the tree.

'I'll tell you to-night, sweet, but it won't be anything.'

I let him kiss me, feeling nothing. As though exhausted by my resistance, Luke let me go. I wondered whether it was wicked to marry someone I felt so little for. 'But when I'm married, I'll feel quite different,' I thought.

'Was the old lady pleased?' said my mother, her lips twitching, her hands busy sorting silks. Mrs. Harding was a standing joke: 'that Œdipus woman' my mother used to call her.

'I think so,' I lied

'Darling, do you love me?'

'Yes, I love you.'

'Very, very much?'

'I'm not going to tell you. You'll become conceited.'

'Please kiss me.'

'There, that's quite enough, my father'll see us.'

'I couldn't care less.'

'What did your mother want to see you for to-day? You're taking a long time to tell me.'

'Darling, do you love me enough?'

'That's irrelevant.'

'No, it's not. Do you?'

'That depends. Enough for what?'

'Enough to be alone with me for the rest of your life?'

'Must I always be alone with you?'

'I mean, if you didn't go on the stage would you mind very much?'

'Oh, yes darling, very much. I must go on the stage. You understood about it. I didn't deceive you.'

'But say circumstances were such that you couldn't?'

'There are no such circumstances. I've even had my audition. From Camberley I'll go up to the R.A.D.A. every day. Why, darling, it's all arranged!'

'You can't love me very much!'

'Luke, your mother has been speaking to you!'

'Well, yes.'

'I know she thinks that I'm too young, and that I want the best of two worlds. In a way that may be true, but as I see it there are too many people doing nothing. I want to be useful. I want us to be useful. We are in this together, Luke.'

'I feel better when you say that.'

'But it's true.'

'If we have children will you give it up?'

'I'll decide when the time comes.'

The wedding was planned for July. Cynthia and Marion came and stayed and were my bridesmaids. Cynthia, radiant, with a large emerald on her fourth finger, was puzzled. She was all eagerness to exchange confidences.

'Darling, do you find Luke cold? Giles is truly wonderful. We have to be alone together the whole time.'

'We have done everything together for the last six months,' I said evasively. 'The last month has been such a terrible rush. So much to see to.'

'What about your ambition to be an actress? You do seem to have given in easily.'

I smiled faintly. 'Oh, no,' I said. 'I'm going on the stage.'

'After you're married?' Cynthia pulled herself up in her chair in which she had been lolling. Admiration crept into her eyes.

'Yes. Luke's agreed. It's all arranged. Only don't talk about it, Cynthia, until afterwards. You know what the older generation are!'

'Do I not! I think it's most exciting, Sorel. I believe you'll realize your ambition yet.' She lowered her voice conspiratorially. 'By the way, darling, you simply mustn't start a family. I suppose you know how not to?'

'Yes, thank you!'

'Don't thank me. You look altogether too virginal. I never thought Luke was your type. I thought you'd marry a real he-man. Someone who'd drag you into his lair by the hair, where you'd be perfectly happy thinking and imagining impossible situations. It would have a little drama about it. But then I never imagined Luke would be so broad-minded as to let you go on the stage. You've got to make a success of it, honey.'

'I'll do my best.'

'And then he'll lose you and spend the rest of his life regretting his magnanimity.' Cynthia got up and ruffled my hair. 'You come to your Aunt Cynthia when you want advice about anything. By the way, darling, can I pop up to London with you to-morrow and see your wedding-dress fitted?'

'Fraid not, darling. Luke wanted to come but I'm refusing all offers.'

'I believe the child has a clandestine meeting with a ne'er-do-well boy friend! Who is he, darling? Tell.'

'His name is Molyneux.'

'Swank.'

'Sorry, but it's true.'

'Seriously, let me come. I could steal away and meet Giles.'

'No, sweet, I want to be alone., Just for the last time.'

After to-morrow I promise to fall in with any whim you may fancy.'

'The whim is yours!'

'So it is.'

The train hummed to me the next day as I sped to London. It sang 'I'm alone at last, I'm alone at last, I'm alone at last.' When the grey door of Molyneux opened the mannequins and fitters took up the refrain, only differently. They thought, 'The poor child has no mother to be with her, no one to watch her last fitting.' I was glad of their sympathy, but I was happy in my aloneness which they would be unable to understand.

'It's really beautiful.' Miss Dodge smoothed the satin round my waist. I looked down at her downy upper-lip, I smelt the faint smell of her hair. Gazing at my reflection I pitied her: 'To be old and unloved, how truly dreadful!'

'You've been very clever with it,' I murmured, and took two steps towards myself in the mirror. I turned this way and that, being careful not to crease myself.

'I'll go and fetch Mr. Molyneux,' said Miss Dodge, beaming.

She stood with her hand on the fitting-room door. She nodded her head, half closed her eyes, and looked at me again. 'It's just right,' she said. 'Just right.'

Left alone I encircled my face with my hands; an oval marked round with my fingers.

'I'm Medea,' I breathed, evil shooting sparks from my eyes.

Suddenly I ran my fingers through my hair, picked up my train and stamped.

'I'm Katherine,' I mouthed defiantly.

Sadly, softly, I fell to my knees. For one moment my whole form drooped. My eyes riveted to my reflection, I gathered imaginary flowers. A tear moistened the corner of my eye; my hair cascaded over my shoulders.

Very quietly I sang,

“‘Larded with sweet flowers;
Which bewept to the grave did go
With true-love showers.’”

Behind me a voice said, “‘How do you, pretty lady?’”

Unthinking I replied, “‘Well, God ‘ild you! They say the owl was a baker’s daughter. Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be. God be at your table!’”

“‘Conceit, upon her father’,” said the voice, and I heard a step move behind me. Slowly recovering from my self-inflicted madness, I looked in the mirror at the man reflected. Here as though magicked was all the Hamlets rolled into one perfect being, only his eyes were blue and I had imagined Hamlet’s brown. He was watching me intently and for a minute neither of us spoke. I remained on my knees bewitched by this partner in play, with his ruffled black hair, his high pale cheek-bones, his tall romantic figure. I held my breath, fearing that he might disappear. Then, very slowly, watching, I said,

“‘My lord, I have remembrances of yours,
That I have longed long to re-deliver;
I pray you now receive them.’”

I knew before I finished that I would not be disappointed. His stillness spoke a thousand eloquences,

“‘No not I; I never gave you aught’,” he said.

“‘My honour’d lord, you know right well you did;
And with them, words of so sweet breath composed
As made the things more rich: their perfume lost,
Take these again, for to the noble mind
Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.
There, my lord.’”

So we spoke our parts, until, reaching, ‘Get thee to a nunnery; why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?’, he came to my side, and, gently turning me, made me stand now a little away from him, as though we were standing

on a real stage set. My eyes never left his face; he might well have been Svengali and I his Trilby, so spell-bound had I suddenly become. I felt that had he said 'Walk on the air' my feet would have elevated. I prayed momentarily, fervently, that all eternity would offer itself up to be used by me and this strange young man who had so naturally walked into my part, as though into my very life.

'Mr. Maxwell!' We had not heard her come in. Her voice was shocked out of her by our intensity. Only the name made me turn slightly to Miss Dodge and look at her.

'I lost my way and found Ophelia,' said Mr. Maxwell, without turning.

'Miss Croft-Dean is in the next fitting-room,' informed Miss Dodge. 'Oh, Mr. Maxwell, look what she's done to her wedding dress! What have you been doing? Kneeling?'

'Wedding dress?' said Mr. Maxwell, his eyes sobering miraculously. He gazed at me over Miss Dodge's head as she fussed round me. With his eyes he caressed me, but his lips said,

' "If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, go: farewell. Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go; and quickly too. Farewell." '

'Whatever are you saying, Mr. Maxwell? Look, she's crying. Miss Sorel is marrying a charming gentleman.'

My eyes closed, tears poured down my cheeks. I said almost in a whisper,

' "Oh heavenly powers restore him!" '

'I wish I hadn't asked Mr. Molyneux to see this dress. I don't know what he will think of the state it's in.'

' "I would I were thy bird," ' he said.

' "Sweet, so would I

Yet I should kill thee with much cherishing.

Good-night, good-night! Parting is such sweet sorrow
That I should say good-night till it be morrow." '

“Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast!
Would I were sleep and peace so sweet to rest!
Hence will I . . .”

His hand on the door, he slowly opened it. My heart stood still. With my hand on my breast I looked at him with eyes which might well have then belonged to Ophelia, Juliet, Desdemona or any character he might call upon to match his.

‘Good-bye,’ he said. ‘We shall meet again.’

“‘Farewell’,” I said sadly. “‘God knows when we shall meet again’.”

‘When you come,’ he said, compelling me with his eyes, ‘you’ll need no audition.’

‘I shall come.’

‘Yes,’ he said, fatalistically, ‘you will.’

‘We shall have to press it,’ said Miss Dodge, clucking her tongue.

Watching the closing door I seized her arm.

‘Was that really THE Mr. Maxwell, Paul Maxwell the producer?’ I asked breathlessly.

‘Yes,’ said Miss Dodge, preoccupied, ‘he came to see Miss Croft-Dean’s new dress for his show. It’s beautiful, in scarlet and blue velvet.’

‘I don’t care,’ I said to myself.

‘I beg your pardon!’

‘I’m sorry, I was thinking aloud. Now you’ll have to forgive me, Miss Dodge. I love this dress, it’s really lovely. Have I smudged the bodice? I’m sorry, you see we were play-acting.’

‘It didn’t look like play-acting to me. I’ve never seen real tears on the stage. Never.’

‘No,’ I said dreamily. ‘Perhaps you are right.’

Nervousness made beads of perspiration come on my nose like tiny drops of glue. Cynthia lent me an infinitesimal handkerchief to remove them. I rubbed them off, careless of the powder. ‘She looks very nervous,’ I

heard someone whisper as I walked up the aisle. I noticed my old nannie, the cherries bobbing in her hat, her mouth working, her eyes narrowed to see me, to see that her bairn was doing her credit on this great day. I felt the steadying of my father's arm, the warmth of Luke's glance as I took my place beside him. In a dream I was married.

In the garden a huge marquee spreadeagled half across the lawn. Like an immense toadstool it stood, giving off waves of heat from its glaring white sides. Already the grass had a flat stamped look; brown smudges like moles were smearing the surface.

From where I stood receiving our guests I could see my mother's face, a blurr of pinkness through the french window of her room. From the animation of her head, which turned, looked down and then round again, I guessed that someone was with her; probably nannie telling her about the church, adding little touches of her own to amuse 'Madam'. Looking further up above the house itself, I noticed the clearness of the air, clear with a midsummer lightness, and against the blue dome of the sky, like silken thread, floated cobwebs and the puffed seeds of dandelions gently parachuting down.

A goodwill warmth seemed to pervade each guest; beginning in the depth of their being it appeared to steal up through their very clothes, stealing up through the silken underslip, the gossamer lace, the stiff collar, the laundered shirt, until it settled at last glowing and burnished on each pair of lips, on each rounded cheek and brow. Strands of hair were patted into place, ribs nudged, chuckles smothered, hands clasped, reminiscences of other weddings 'not nearly such fun' exchanged.

Ringed in, I felt at bay. Suddenly above the babble of voices I noticed a speck in the sky, heard one faint note before it was lost to me. A skylark singing its heart out in the freedom of the air. So whilst I played a part for my mother, the lawn my stage, I freed my heart to sing with the lark.

'I shouldn't drink any more,' Mrs. Harding held out

her hand for my glass. Submissively I handed it to her. 'You're very flushed,' she added.

'You look sumptuous, positively good enough to eat.' It was the young man of the blue dinner jacket. Mrs. Harding sniffed.

'Do I register?' I asked demurely.

'Sparks flying everywhere. Earwig, doesn't Sorel look terrific?'

The Earwig, clad from head to toe in a flowing cloak, a posy of artificial flowers arranged tipsily on her head, said, 'Too, too sacrificial. A veritable lamb.'

'Good-bye, darling,' I said to my mother later. 'I'll see you in three weeks.'

'You have too much make-up on, Sorel. Fetch me a tissue.'

She rubbed my face diligently, producing a streaked effect from ear to ear.

'Cynthia, you powder her, dear, she's blobbed it all,' said my mother unreasonably.

'I think you want to keep her,' said Cynthia, laughing, as she poked her finger in the cream once more.

In the car Luke took my hand and laid it flat on his thigh. We were gliding smoothly along towards Fölkestone. I was heavy with exhaustion. I laid my head against the sun-hot leather of the seat. The road was ribbon white, puffs of dust blew up behind us, chalking the grass at the side of the road. Overhead, gulls soared and glided, becoming imprinted suddenly against purple-brown trunks of green-roofed woods.

'Happy, Mrs. Harding?' asked Luke, searching for my pulse.

'Hmmm!' I murmured sleepily. I gave myself up to a feeling of floating disembodiment. If I thought at all I felt icy cold. When I looked at Luke beside me he had suffered 'no sea change'.

'Where are we going?' I asked. The honeymoon was Luke's secret.

'The South of France,' he said triumphantly, as another might say, 'the Taj Mahal by moonlight'. 'But to-night we're staying at Folkestone.'

'How perfect,' I said quietly.

Our luggage neat, new and unlabelled, was lifted from the car by the porter. I wished that I had scratched it and covered it with a rainbow of labels. In the hall Luke turned to sign the register, and I followed the luggage up the stairs, conscious of the eyes of the receptionist boring into my back, taking me in from my crocodile heels to my small Paris hat. I felt hopelessly vulnerable; turning a corner in the stairs which hid me from sight, I breathed in the darkness thankfully. In our room, large, red-papered and filled with a huge double-bed, the porter put down the luggage like an infinitely precious bouquet. I raked my bag for change, but the door closed silently, and he was gone.

I clicked the locks of my suitcase; there, soft as soap flakes, lay my night things. I lifted them out and laid them on the bed, covering them shyly with a corner of the quilt. I put Luke's brushes beside mine on the dressing-table; it was a sign of acknowledgment, a cognizant gesture.

'Dinner, darling.' Luke banged the bathroom door loudly. I started and hastily turned on a tap. I had been staring into space trying to feel privacy as an actuality. It had come to me that I might never luxuriate in aloneness again.

At dinner the champagne bubbled up inside me, effervescing down my throat, and blurring the pencilled outlines of the room. The waiter became a smudged study in black and white. The other diners floated eerily, standing out in effulgence momentarily, and then diving suddenly, secretly into dark grey corners. Luke became all eyes and teeth, his expressions jerked from him like a marionette. 'I'm tight,' I thought, and focused my eyes carefully on my plate. A mountain covered with sticky

blood was my next dish. I pushed it away and sipped my champagne.

'Don't you like pears, darling?' asked Luke. His eyes meeting, he squinted. His teeth moved like the ivory notes of a piano. Disembodied, his head moved close to mine. I shook my head, the champagne dribbled coldly over my fingers.

'Shall we go up?' asked Luke.

'Let's have a liqueur,' I said, feeling that I was drowning, my voice coming from the shadowed depths of the table.

'Of course,' cried Luke, his voice assuming a heartiness. 'Waiter? Two Grand Marniers.'

After the second liqueur Luke's fingers tugged mine.

'Let's go up,' he said urgently.

'You're very good-looking,' I said. My voice came from a great distance. I tried again. 'You're being very sweet,' I said, holding on to the moment.

My mood changed and I looked at him with all the cold dignity I could muster. I rallied my senses one by one. I heard his voice; I smelt quite clearly the Turkish tobacco; I felt his fingers on mine, though they might well have been my own knitted together. I could see the door through which I must pass at the other end of the room. It was like peering through the wrong end of a telescope.

'You must wait down here,' I said sibilantly, starting at the sound of my voice. He looked at me as one intriguer at another, his finger against his nose.

'I'll wait,' he whispered, his breath fanning my cheek, his lips dusting mine.

I rose unsteadily. A waiter appeared from nowhere and hovered anxiously as round a sleep-walker. A few late diners lifted their heads and looked towards me. 'I'll never make the door,' I thought helplessly. On all sides tables seemed shoulder high. Usually graceful, I hit my hips heavily against all impedimenta, until I felt as though I were swinging from hurt to hurt like a pendulum. Convulsively I clutched a chair, paused, and lowering my head,

started again. My ankles turned over, weak as jellies, this way, that way, they went. At last in a rush I made the door. Taking my key from the receptionist I ran up the stairs two at a time. I could almost hear her thinking 'she's keen,' but I cared about nothing any more, I only wanted to reach the haven of my room. Once there I leant against the door thankfully before putting on the light; the floor rocked like the deck in a rough sea. 'Luke will be here in a moment,' I thought and, panic seizing me, I put on the light and taking my night things ran into the bathroom, locking the door, testing it several times, before I felt safe enough to relax.

Running in a bath, I undressed. Naked I stood in front of a mirror and watched my pink shape blotted out by blue vaporous clouds. I looked with interest at my red manicured toe-nails. I had never realized that they were so uniform before, each regimented in its bright enamel coating. Stepping into the bath, my white limbs floated on the water like dismembered bodies. My fair hair darkening in the water, strewed round me like the soft tendrils of seaweed. My breasts disproportionately large like mountains snow-capped, coned by the nipple, became vulnerable, rising as they did over and above the rest of my body. My mind a blank, I lay quite still letting the water seep into me, lulled by the dripping of a tap. Lazily I stuck one foot out of the water. It looked a long way away. I smiled at it gently, tenderly; the tendons stuck out sharply as I bent my toes back. 'Dear body,' I thought protectively, 'no one must touch you.' I lay further back, my chin jutting up, floating like Ophelia; the shower, steamed chromium, hung above me; I turned it on, making a soft rain, full of prism colours. I felt the water creeping through my hair to my skull, like soft fingers: it was teasingly ticklish. 'My head,' I thought suddenly, 'will that be inviolate?'

A sound caught my ear through the gentle lap of the water. It was like a door handle sliding into place. In one movement I sat up, the water cascading from my hair

and shoulders, running smoothly over my flesh until it formed damp runnels, the water separating from itself and settling. I looked towards the door. The handle was turning again slowly by stealth; when it reached its full turn it was shaken gently in impatience and disbelief. Unavailing the handle slid back again and three times the operation was repeated. I reached for the soap and in haste began to cover myself with a lathery foam. The soap slipped from my hand and fell in the water between my legs. My eyes glued to the door, I groped blindly for it. So softly the door was shaken and yet I believed it would open.

Washed, I sprang from the bath, drying myself tenderly, my body infinitely precious. The sharpness of eau de cologne bit into my flesh; my talcum powder went 'poof' sweeter than flowers. 'Why all this?' I thought, puzzled. 'Why all this?'

The door handle was suddenly still. I cleaned my teeth in front of the smeared mirror; each tooth had separate attention, my lips drawn back softly from pink gums. Rinsing my brush there was suddenly nothing more to keep me. I sat on the bathroom stool looking round forlornly, my feet wound round the stool's legs like a child. My mules slopped off and lay rakishly on the chequered floor. I began to feel soporific from the scents of soaps and powders, the aftermath of champagne. 'The reluctant bride,' I thought wryly, smiling to myself. 'I wonder if all women feel the same.' I wished I had been more curious, asked more questions. The bath gurgled out, rousing me. I no longer waited for something to happen but went towards the door, sliding my feet into my mules. The steam cleared, I saw myself in the mirror, I lifted my hand in a gesture of 'farewell', pausing to see myself for the last time a maiden. Then I opened the bathroom door.

'To-day we go to France.' Luke bent over me and kissed the only visible part of me, my hair on the pillow.

'Lovely,' I said, snuggling further down and pulling the pillow with me, 'but why so early?'

Luke slapped me playfully.

'Hurry, darling, you've only got half an hour. We mustn't miss the boat.'

Little did I know as I dressed hastily that this was the last time I was to see Luke his usual careless happy self, that in such a short time he would leave his irresponsibility behind him, that disaster would twist his character.

Perhaps if he had been less jubilant he would have noticed the lorry as it skidded towards us, when we turned our car leisurely out of the hotel gates, though it is doubtful whether even so he could have saved us. As it was, the huge green monstrous thing ricocheted against the gatepost; I screamed and flung my hands to my face; and the last thing I heard was the splintering of wood and the seared sound of breaking glass.

Coming round much later I found myself back in the hotel bedroom, and a man with a stethoscope bending over me.

'Luke,' I said faintly, and tried to rise.

A firm hand pressed me back against the pillows.

'Your husband is alive. Now take it easily yourself.'

'Are you a doctor? Where is Luke?'

'He's in another room for the time being. Try and get some sleep. You had a nasty knock on the head.'

'Can I see Luke?' I asked. I felt sleep engulfing me, tugging me down.

'Not for a little while. We would like to send for someone to look after you both. Can you tell us of someone?'

I made an effort to think, thought of Mrs. Harding, and said nothing. A second later meteors seemed to be flying from space towards me and I lost consciousness once more.

When I awoke again, a meal which looked very like breakfast had been put on the table beside me. I raised my head gingerly and but for a slight headache I felt

perfectly well. When the doctor came in I was consuming vast quantities of toast and marmalade.

'That's splendid,' he said, rubbing his hands together. 'My name's Millicent. I was called in to attend to you and your husband.'

'How is he? How's my husband? Can I see him now?'

'When you've finished your breakfast. You won't be able to talk to him very much. He's under morphia for the moment.'

'Is he then very hurt?' I asked, shocked.

'Enough to put off your trip to the Continent for a while. I would suggest that you send for his mother.'

'Please not,' I said quickly. 'If there is any nursing to be done I am perfectly capable.'

Dr. Millicent looked at the wallpaper above my head; it struck me that he was avoiding my eyes.

'There are some rather tricky dressings,' he said, wavering. 'I should like to have a word with her.'

'Get her on the telephone,' I suggested. The idea of having Mrs. Harding here was abhorrent.

'It would be easier to see her.'

'I'll ask my husband if he wishes her to come,' I said, firmly convinced in my own mind that he would not feel the need of her now that he had me. 'Let's go and see him.'

Luke's room was in total darkness, and until the doctor drew the blind I groped blindly about. My first reaction was one of intense relief when I saw Luke. He was sleeping and there was only a small patch over one eye. But on going over to him I noticed with horror that a cage reaching from his knees to his waist protected his body from the weight of the bed-clothes. I turned quickly to Dr. Millicent.

'He was hit by the steering wheel,' he said to my unspoken question.

I slipped my hand into Luke's where it lay on the coverlet.

'Darling,' I whispered, close to his ear. He opened his eyes. His lips formed 'Hello'.

'Luke, do you want your mother here? I can look after you.'

'Send for her,' was all he said, as he drowsed off once more into a morphine haze.

'We've had an accident in the car,' I told Mrs. Harding. 'The doctor wants to see you.' I hated admitting my inadequacy.

'Is Luke badly hurt?'

'I'm not sure. I don't think so.'

'Tell him I'll come right away. Book me a room, there's a good girl. I'll catch the first train possible. Good-bye.'

She takes it for granted that he needs her, I thought jealously. She has always run to Luke whenever he needs her. How can I hope to emulate such a mother? I smacked down a directory in sudden rage, screwing up the corners with angry fingers. 'I'm his wife,' I said to myself over and over again. 'I can look after him. I'm used to ill people: look at my own mother.'—'You're too young,' whispered another voice. 'He turns to his mother because you're immature.'—'I'll prove to him that I can cope,' I thought, putting my head against the cool of the black receiver, and then suddenly feeling ridiculous, seeing an impatient shadow waiting to replace me in the box, I went out and ran up to Luke. He was asleep, but determined to prove myself I sat on a chair, brought a stack of *Punches*, the only literature I could find in the lounge, and placed them on the floor beside me. Stubborn and determined I waded diligently through them, my weather eye on Luke's recumbent form. He showed no signs of needing me and it was only later, when his mother came bustling in, that he awoke drowsily and, sighing gratefully, gave himself up to her care.

'Well, my son,' she said briskly, 'how are you?' Her eyes rested on the frame and she flushed.

Luke looked past her to me, and hesitated. She turned

at once and taking me by the arm she gently propelled me from the room. 'You understand, don't you, darling?' she said with icy sweetness. 'I must find out all about it and he'll tell me. I'll come and fetch you in a few minutes.' She patted my shoulder and with that small indignity I had to be content.

Later at dinner I found that I was to sleep in a small room next to Luke; it would make it easier for Mrs. Harding to nurse him by night.

'You should ring your parents,' said Mrs. Harding, sipping her soup.

'I'd rather not,' I replied patiently. 'I'll wait a few days.'

'I'm sending for my own doctor,' added Mrs. Harding. I looked surprised. 'Is it as serious as that?' I asked.

'I should like his opinion,' said Mrs. Harding guardedly.

It was Doctor Crawford who enlightened me as to how badly Luke had been hurt. He was a dear gentle old man, who went in awe of Mrs. Harding, but had a very real affection for Luke.

'You'll have to be very patient, Sorel,' he said after he had examined the patient. 'I've every hope that he may completely recover.' It was the first time it had been suggested to me he might not recover. Horrified I asked, 'But what is the matter with him?'

Doctor Crawford, rocking on the balls of his feet, looked anxiously at the door as though to make his escape. Evasively he said, 'I think your mother-in-law had better tell you.'

'Couldn't you?' I pleaded.

At that precise moment Mrs. Harding came in. She looked suspiciously into our faces as though to gauge how much had been said. Doctor Crawford put her at rest.

'Perhaps I'll leave this young lady to you, to explain,' he said and made for the door.

'Sorel,' said Mrs. Harding easily, smoothing her skirt, 'you've got to be a dear patient girl. Luke's been badly

hurt. The wheel drove into his stomach and he may be a long time getting well. At the worst you may never be able to lead a completely normal life. But we've every hope he may completely recover.'

'Oh!' was all I could find to say, in a very small voice.

Mrs. Harding folded her hands in her lap. 'He's always been such a healthy young man.' Her voice becoming plaintive, I felt sorry for her; it reminded me of my father, and my mother's wretched headaches.

'Do you think he'll get better?' I asked.

She leant forward and, with a movement unnaturally gentle for her, took my hand and held it between her soft lined ones.

'We hope so, Sorel, we hope so. It may take a long time, but you're a sweet girl and I know will bear with him. Later when he is stronger there is no reason why you shouldn't take him to the South of France, for a while. He'll be quite fit to travel in a week or so and it may do him good: anyway it'll be a break for you both. One thing I want to impress on you, Sorel, is that whatever disappointments the future may hold in store for you, you've married a good man. With so much evil in the world, that in itself is a compensation. You'll realize as you grow older how much it means to have someone you can rely on.'

I drew my hand from hers and gazed down blindly at my feet.

'But may it be years . . .?' I began.

'Darling,' said Mrs. Harding righteously, 'you'll be given strength.'

Strength, I thought bitterly. Strength for what? Strength to be a nurse, maybe for years. Strength to forget I was young. I thought of my plans for the stage. I suddenly saw Paul Maxwell quite clearly. 'It's because my motives were wicked that I'm being punished,' I thought. Unable to answer Mrs. Harding, I murmured something and wearily left the room.

As I passed Luke's room I heard him call. 'Oh, please not now,' I prayed to myself. I tiptoed softly, scarce breathing, but he must have been listening intently. 'Sorel?' he called.

I went and stood in the doorway, my face in the shadow. I wanted to cry; most of all I wanted to be alone. I tried hard to smile at Luke; it was a poor crooked affair and failed to mislead him.

'Mum's spoken to you?' he asked. I nodded. He held out his hand to me, but I remained by the door transfixed.

'Would you like to get out of it now?' he asked.

I shook my head angrily. 'How can you suggest it, darling? Of course not.'

'I mean it.'

I went slowly over to the bed and stood at his feet. I stroked the satin eiderdown with my hand, rasping it where my hands were rough. I looked down, not trusting my eyes. Furtively under my eye-lashes I could see on the marble-topped commode bottles of medicine, a hypodermic syringe, torturous and cruel-looking, half full of liquid. There were papers and magazines in a littered pile by the bed, some half tented as they had fallen from his fingers. The petals of some roses on the dressing-table dropped softly, hardly a breath of sound, and yet the only sound in the room, in which even my hand had become still.

Unsteadily I sat at the foot of the bed. His feet bulged up forming a pink mound of quilt. I put my hand under the eiderdown and through the blanket I found his big toe and pulled it gently. I smiled up at him, making a mock of his seriousness.

'Does it hurt dreadfully, darling?' I asked, and when he nodded the tears began to course soundlessly down my cheeks, splashing unhindered on to the quilt where they were absorbed and blotted, changing the pinkness to dingy grey.

Mrs. Harding was like a sentinel on duty. She broke me in none too gently to my onerous duties, never letting me rest, always watching for signs of slackness, of relaxation. Most of all she spoilt my early mornings, that magic time between sleeping and waking which we share with the animals, still frowsty and warm before our brains turn us into superior beings, ticking over not only for food and preservation, like the beasts of the field, but winding along subterranean channels of thought, along subtle twisting channels.

In the pleasant numbness before full consciousness, I would lie in the early morning revelling in my solitude. The thick velvet curtains emitted not one particle of light, or if they did, it was only one small finger pointed like a stalactite down the plum-and-black of the wall-paper. Muffled sounds reached me from the street below: the throb of traffic, a boy whistling, the high cry of the milkman. Sometimes the eight o'clock hooter would fill me with guilt, calling as it did people to work, but with the resilience of youth I would snuggle down catlike, sensual, in my warmth and comfort; fainéant I would watch the darkness through drowsing eyelids. 'Not yet, not yet,' my good genie would whisper in my ear, still a little time before I had to face the endless boredom of my days; to open my door to the food-ridden air, the cloistered corridors, the *Punches* laid out like huge packs of cards on shiny-topped tables. The reluctantly obsequious hotel staff bringing endless trays of untouched food to Luke, and removing them equally untouched a little later. The real packs of cards slipping through my careless fingers, or hiding a stifled yawn to be replaced with a false bright smile which I had drilled my face to wear, in spite of legs tingling with pins and needles, of sun which shone and never warmed my skin, but shone itself out on free, untrammelled, other people. Sometimes I felt behind my false brightness that my heart was bleeding itself away in my breast; the one thing I could not control, my heart, sustained its ache, crying my tears for me, suffering alone

my disappointment. Meals became ordeals, one's palate, like one's body, tired and unreceptive, tasting neither the substance nor the quality.

Like a thief, stealing and hugging to his breast some great treasure, so I hugged this morning moment to myself. By my bed, gleaming, almost phosphorescent, would be my early morning tea tray. I could sense rather than see the spiral of steam clouding the top of the hot-water jug. Before this liquid warmth settled into tepidity I would put out a bare warm arm and pouring out my tea, lie stretched and sinuous, pivoted on my stomach. Putting the cup to my lips I would let the hot sweet liquid gush like a heartburn down my throat, at first startling, then soothing, settling my lids to drowse once more, my whole soporific body to relax.

The moment was shattered always by Mrs. Harding. Relentless, she would break open my door, entering on vigorous well-shod feet, her legs sensibly clad in serviceable lisle thread, her grey twin-set making her invisible to my sleep-sodden eyes, only her face, a pale moon, appearing suspended in the star-studded blackness.

'What, Sorel!' she would exclaim each morning, feigning her surprise. 'Still abed, lazy-bones! Luke is asking for you, darling, so up you get! Let me move that tray for you, I'll pop it outside.'

Hypnotized by her alien presence, I watched my tray like some planet borne aloft, all promise of prolonging my pleasure by a second cup of tea removed. I would hear it clink as she deposited it firmly outside on the table. Not content with the removal of my solace, she would return, her brisk feet never wavering, and with one sweep of her arm lay bare the window of the velvet curtains, which ran harshly back on their runners, letting in the sun with almost liquid suddenness, or even more often the indeterminate greyness of a misty summer day.

Like a rudely aroused dormouse I would sit up in bed, my eyes contracting painfully, focusing Mrs. Harding,

who wavered like a mirage before me, framed against the window.

'There,' she said, rubbing her hands, all animation, 'now up you get.' As though to soften her most unfeminine firmness she would put her head on one side and scrutinize me, appraising me with a hard bird-like look.

'Lucky girl,' she said, 'to wake each morning with such a complexion. But there, you're only eighteen! Being so young you should be up with the lark, though, darling. Now I'll go and tell Luke that you'll be along in a few minutes.'

Joining, half an hour later, a washed and already breakfasted Luke, I would wonder afresh how we could kill yet another day. Gone was the laughter we had shared on the mountains, for there was little enough at this time to laugh about. Gone too was the pat-ball of our casual conversation, our easy gossip about mutual friends, so rushing into activity when the conversation flagged. Under other normal circumstances our lack of anything in common would have passed unnoticed, until a safe confidence on each other's presence had replaced it, and dependent on many people we would have drifted into a friendly relationship brought about by propinquity and trust. But now, however, we found ourselves too soon thrown on our own reserves and, worst of all, inactive. In spite of this to our credit at times how I would, after all, manage without a word. Regarding, coming in as I did each morning to order, Mrs. Le mustiness of a slept-in bedroom already lifting through the open window, to the painful dressings already taken to without fuss and without bother. She was also an invaluable supplier of words for the crossword puzzle, which Luke after he had read the racing news and rung his bookie fell on like a drug addict. I was and felt hopelessly inadequate. As Luke's strength returned to him he liked to pull me with hands as strong as steel on to the bed beside him, his mouth questing, his hands restless. Afraid, as I lost my balance and became smothered by quilt and Luke, I cried out, banal and stupid, that 'his

mother would come in' and struggled with him like an asthmatic patient. Exhausted and mortified by these bouts, I would move myself out of reach to the end of the bed.

'What'll we do to-day?' I would ask, still trembling.

'No more education,' Luke would laugh. He had forgotten that I was to teach him about books. After one or two attempts to improve his mind, I gave it up. He preferred the thriller, the more lurid novel, or merely to play cards and to gamble. Under these circumstances the thought of a long illness appalled me. How could I hope to amuse Luke, and at the same time stop myself dying of boredom?

One morning after the doctor had seen him, I came in to find him grinning from ear to ear.

'Sorel,' he said.

'Yes, darling?'

'The doctor says I may move! Mum is making the reservations and we'll be off to St. Tropez at the end of the week. I'll have to stay in my room, but the old doc thinks the sun and warmth will do me good.'

'I hope so, darling.'

'You do want to go, don't you, Sorel? It'll be a change after Folkestone.'

'As long as it does you good I don't mind where we go!'

'Good old Sorel! I say, darling?'

'Yes, Luke?'

'You'll stick by me, darling, won't you? You'll see me through this?'

'Of course.'

'I wouldn't really blame you if you got fed up and buzzed off, but do bear with me a little longer, and I'll be all right.'

'I am sure you will be, Luke.'

'Sorel, you do love me?'

'Of course I love you.'

To Mrs. Harding I said, 'Will you come?'

'No, I must go home. Besides, I think it's high time

the little love birds were alone. I'll come out later if you need me and relieve you of some of the nursing. You'll be very comfortable though, I know Madame Seze very well. Your father-in-law and I have often stayed there, and I've written to a doctor to keep an eye on Luke. There's nothing to worry about, but drop me a line if anything's wrong.'

So she even arranged my honeymoon, I thought regretfully. I had hoped that Luke had had a hand in it. Aloud I said,

'It's very good of you.'

'Not at all,' she said, and then, discounting me altogether, she said words I was to hear her repeat over and over again: 'I would do anything for Luke.'

Mrs. Harding saw us off on the boat. There were tears in her eyes when she kissed Luke, who was standing precariously supported between two porters. To me she whispered, 'Do your duty, Sorel, and you will be happy.' It seemed strange advice to give to a girl going on her honeymoon, but then, as we both knew, this was no ordinary honeymoon, in spite of Luke's high spirits. As he was helped along, weaving in between the crowd, he joked with the porters. He might well have had no care in the world. In the train he was the same—buoyant with hope. We drank red wine, getting giddily tipsy. My head became like a huge cave through which I soared until, hitting a wall, I would crumple slowly down and, bumping the bottom, I would begin to float again. As we drank wine so Luke became warmly affectionate. 'Darling,' he would whisper, his voice thick with emotion. I bent over him to tuck him up. His hand wandered over my hair and down my cheek. Even a little bit inebriate I stiffened, breathless until he should leave me alone. Wary and watchful I saw his hands, squat and blunt. His impotency lay like a gulf between us, a thought to be steered clear

from. 'He will soon be better,' his mother reassured me. No one had ever asked or answered the question, 'What if he doesn't get better?' Something in me was repelled by the abnormal, by the unknown. I felt no yearnings towards Luke, only a withdrawing, a dread. Once when he was kissing me he looked suddenly into my face. A look, unguarded, naked, must have been there for him to see, for he twisted my shoulder away from him crying, 'Go away, go away! I can't bear to see that look on your face.' I had crept away knowing that sometime, somehow, I would fail him.

The sun burning into my back was my first impression of St. Tropez. It burnt there as we lifted Luke from the train and a few minutes later as we climbed into a taxi. It left me with a feeling of wet-cold between my shoulder blades and it was not unpleasant. In the taxi Luke took my hand; he was tired and jolted. 'It'll be lovely to be alone with you at last, Sorel,' he said.

We drove to a hotel, high at the back of the town, the Hôtel des Arbres, with its front overlooking the town and in the blue distance the harbour. Hidden behind it was the sudden dwindling of interest in buildings and township, a mere sprawled flat cottage or two along sparse scrubbed fields, a twisted wind-blown tree, fields measured by broken railings or the indentation of a half-attempted ditch, and, leading like ancient gnarled veins from all directions as though with urgency towards the town, deep cart-ruts left there in the winter's slush by waggon wheels and now baked hard, dry and dusty, to stay until the first rains, by the hot quasi-tropical sun. In front of the hotel ran a maze of narrow balconied streets; grey-washed and cobbled, they lost themselves behind buildings which huddled together, white above the grey, radiating heat from their pebbled walls. The hotel was of a whiteness to make the others almost grey, its roof red-tiled, scallop-

edged where a fine line of gold glinted and sparkled like a chinese pagoda. To break the white expanse, a mosaic of blue enamel with the varied hues of a peacock cradled the top half of the house. Two buildings identical, only varying in size, faced each other, the larger to hold the guests, *the smaller the hotel staff.* *From the end of these buildings a curved white wall continued each façade, meeting centrally with a wrought-iron gate slung between, padlocked, its traceries finely pencilled against the green ghostliness of a semi-circle of eucalyptus trees beyond.*

Enchanted I climbed out of the taxi and rang the bell hanging by the gate. A lizard, yellowy green, flickered against the white wall and disappeared. I pressed my face between the curved bars and looked in on the round, shadowed courtyard. In the centre, earth raised to a mound blocked in by shining varnished stones, a Spanish oak threw forest shadows on the flat paved ground. Fine dust played in whorls and eddies, filling the yard with faint movement, the only motion in the stillness of the afternoon. The eucalyptus trees stood like dancers, fey and faery, poised for ever on their toes. In front of each veranda, huge green barrels stood, out-proportioning the small palms which grew within, dwarfing them to insignificance, their fingered leaves rubbing together like dry sticks.

— Already I saw myself enjoying the Æsop fable atmosphere, the arid lightness of the place. On the edge I waited, revelling. Behind me I could feel Luke's impatience. Turning, I saw him peering out of the taxi anxiously towards me. Unimpressed by his surroundings I knew that he was thinking 'tea' or even 'whisky'. The driver, all hot impatience, was wiping sausage-like fingers across his forehead, runnelling it with grime. I rang the bell again, apologetically disturbing the quiet.

As though I had let loose an electric current, releasing a myriad of pent-up sounds, the air became filled with clamour. Somewhere behind the house a dog barked, a parrot, disturbed, shrieked in its caged home, a sun-blind

ran smartly up and quivered; the air became rent with women's voices and a voice over and above the rest, but protected by walls, was heard shouting. In a matter of minutes a maid, dressed in black and tying the ends of her starched white apron, came running out of the house towards me.

'M'selle?' she asked, stopping short at the gate and putting her hands to her ruffled hair.

'Non, je suis Madame Harding,' I said, amused.

'Ah, ah,' she cried, busy now with padlocks, '*entrez donc, entrez, madame,*' and, turning, she shrieked our names to the voices within.

'Oh, la, la!' I heard a gay voice call, and, looking up, I saw high on a balcony, the awning striping her with green and white, Madame Seze hastily buttoning her blouse and gesticulating expressively to her maid.

With the help of the maid I half carried, half dragged Luke up the stairs to our room. The driver, with an eye to his fare, shouldered him unceremoniously from behind. It was a slow and painful business: Luke's legs were almost without feeling, but his head and shoulders sweated with the effort it cost him. Our room when we reached it was worth the journey. Cool and shuttered, it had a floor of the softest lichen green. Over the huge double bed was flung a Spanish shawl the blue of a butterfly's wing. In the shallow alcoves surrounding the walls were Spanish jars from the softest rose to dark terra-cotta, giving warmth and colour to the cool of the whitewash. A larger alcove, a mere continuation of the room, formed a shower-room.

The proprietress, Madame Seze, arrived panting, the top button of her blouse still undone. She fussed and fumed round us like a mother hen. Luke lay extended on the bed; carefully, so as not to disturb him, she whisked the shawl from under him and felt his forehead. She opened the window, talking all the time.

'The poor Monsieur! Oh, la, la, but how unfortunate! Your mother she wrote to me, she tell me all about it. She said to me, "Odette, you look after my children, they have

a terrible accident. They are very young; you give them your best room, the best of everything, for their honeymoon, you see they have good time, lots of sun, lots to eat. My son must come back to me big and strong, from your lovely St. Tropez.' I, Odette,' she dramatically thumped her chest, 'will look after you like a mother.' She suddenly leant forward and stroked my cheek. 'You are pale, Madame Harding, you too must be looked after.' She smiled conspiratorially. 'I send Louise up with tea. Yes?'

I smiled and nodded. I liked her, and felt warm and happy. She went down the stairs haggling stridently with the driver.

'What an old gas-bag,' said Luke crossly. 'And what awful hair!'

'I like her,' I said.

'Wouldn't trust her a yard,' said Luke.

'Oh, darling, why ever not? Because her hair's dyed? That's no reason to suppose she's all false. I think she's nice and warm and easy.'

'Too easy,' grumbled Luke.

'Come,' I said, helping him off with his coat. 'Are you afraid she'll make a pass at you?' I suddenly blushed as I so often did now when I thought I had been tactless.

Madame Seze certainly looked like a coquette, but a coquette with a heart of gold. She held herself like a young girl, with the wonderful arrogance of French women, and yet must have been well into her middle forties. Her hair was the colour of a chocolate, strawberry centred; nature has never in all her orgies achieved such a shade. It hung in heavy ringlets to her shoulders and she would throw back her head, flicking her curls with her fingers like a young girl. Her eyes were large, brown, amused; the lashes carefully mascara-ed, the eyebrows arched precariously above. Her mouth formed the cutest cupid bow, falsely coloured, falsely shaped. To carry further this falsity, her figure was hour-glass, the waist pinched and squeezed, the bosom and hips ballooning enormously from

this torturous girth. She had all the flamboyance of the South, the generosity and precociousness of the gamin.

'Would you like me to wash you?' I asked Luke. He nodded and I damped a sponge. 'I'm going to have a shower before the tea comes,' I said.

'I must get used to being looked at,' I thought to myself as I slipped my dressing-gown round my shoulders and undressed in the shelter it afforded. Luke had dragged himself up in the bed and was half-leaning, half-lying against the wall. He held a book in his hands, but his eyes like gimlets were on me, not on the print. The shower hung behind a slight curve in the wall. If I stood pressed against the wall I was out of his sight, away from those indecently prying eyes, but one false movement and he would see me reflected in the mirror, which hung unornamented, clear as a pool of water. It never then entered my head to ask him not to look: I went in fear of making an issue, always. Placing a pile of my clothes as near the shower as I dared, I stepped into position against the wall, leaving my dressing-gown to get wet at my feet. In the confined space I had to turn on the taps with my thumb, screwed painfully behind me. Shocked first by the cold, then by the hot, in peril of burning, I suffered behind clenched teeth the uncontrolled temperatures. I thought of nuns bathing in calico, and wished myself one. I wanted to cry out to Luke, to break the tension, but fear of the ridiculous prevented me. Taking the soap I lathered my feet, the gush of water fountaining off my back; as I straightened the soap slipped through my fingers and, pivoting gently, landed on the floor out of my reach. I leant forward, my fingers at full stretch, and touched it, but in its slipperiness slithered it further. The water was now scalding and as I stood up it fell cascading on my soft vulnerable front body; with a gasp I moved back and, my foot barely touching the soap, I slipped, but recovered, grasping the taps. Reaching for a towel I tried to flick the soap towards me and at last recovering it, was able to finish my ablutions. Sighing with relief, I again felt for

the towel, and in so doing my heel swivelled and catching the soap, slime against slime, landed me ungracefully sprawling, all arms and legs, out in the open, where for one brief moment I caught sight of Luke's amused face before I gathered myself together, wrenched arms, scraped legs, and swathed myself in my dressing-gown.

'Serve you bloody well right,' was Luke's only comment.

In the evening Madame Seze and I held a consultation on the stairs. Luke, who seemed restive and watchful, said as I returned to the room,

'What are you two whispering about?'

'Whispering?' I said nonchalantly. 'We weren't whispering.'

'Then you were hissing like snakes. Come on, what was it?'

'I was just asking Madame Seze for a divan for me to sleep on.'

'Why?'

'I thought it would be better,' I said, carelessly sniffing mimosa in a vase.

'Why?'

'Please darling, don't keep asking why. You know perfectly well why.'

Luke, his mouth obstinate, said, 'No, I don't. You can perfectly well sleep in this bed.'

'I might keep you awake.'

'No, you won't. Besides which I like having you near me.'

Desperately, 'You might keep me awake.'

'No, I won't. I didn't know you were so keen on your sleep before. We can try it anyway. There's no need to go and make a scene with Madame.'

'Darling, I didn't make a scene. You might try and understand.'

'How can I ever get well, Sorel, if you don't back me up? I want you near me. It helps.'

'I think I hear Madame with the divan. I must go and stop her. I was only thinking of you, Luke.'

PART II

St. Tropez is a place of enchantment. The coast curves away east to St. Maxime, west to Cap de Tropez, hidden behind the rocks of St. Croix. The harbour, full at this time with summer yachts of all sizes, is gay with festive colours. White, swan-like yachts cradled by lime green lines; blue yachts, the blue of butchers' smocks; yellow yachts with red sails carelessly fastened to the booms, the sun gleaming blood through the canvas. Small, bobbing, impudent boats with oars askew, alongside formal naval yachts with their uniform navy and white, their shining brass, their scrubbed decks curving in beautiful lines from prow to stern. Flags of all nationalities make a world of their own mast high. Lifting lazily in the breeze, furling out smartly like shaken linen, then curling tiredly round the mast until the zephyr lifts and flings them out again. Below on the decks, on the quayside, people. People as divergent as their flags. Old and young, they mingle and chatter, parrot language. Brown long limbs contrast with pink peeling legs. White flesh, blue-veined, is strangely out of place against the sun-kissed. Brief linen shorts look strangely right; long cotton frocks a false modesty. Sun hats move and sway with the wearers' animation. Dark heads move against fair. Here bends a man securing for the night; another leaps ashore, an animate curve; yet another pours liquid from a sparkling shaker. The scene is one of movement, a kaleidoscope of colour. This ceaseless restlessness is carried to the wayside cafés, in one insurgent motion, here to sip aperitifs, to hail friends. A slim arm is raised, a bangle glints and chases to the elbow; glasses are raised, eyes meet, moist and warm; eyes avoid interception, backs are thumped, money is passed from well-tended fingers to work-worn waiters. Behind on a

gentle sloping hill rises the town. Warm pastel-washed arcaded houses, with rectangular shutters violent in their varied colours of green, emerald and hot, to the restfulness of lime. Behind the shutters, smoothed and fogged by the haze of heat, the houses fade gently on a back-cloth. Above the whole, the sky, flat and impenetrable, intensely blue, and beyond the yachts, the harbour wall, the sea milk blue.

Alone the first evening, I explored whilst Luke slept. Enjoying my freedom, I longed to join the moving throng of pleasure seekers, but shyly did not dare to sit alone, preferring to hug a wall and watch half-hidden on the edge. Two men passing eyed me curiously. Afraid that they might speak I turned my head this way and that as though looking for someone. Their conversation paused, they hesitated and then passed on. I heard one say, 'Even the road sidings are cultivated. They never waste their land.'

'But my dear fellow,' said the other—he was dressed in a red shirt, shorts and sandals, 'I couldn't tolerate those pictures of Jewish atrocities, they had them in every village!'—'Ah, well . . .' and they were lost round a turning.

Taking a different road back, I passed old women sitting in their doorways, in a street so narrow that I nearly brushed them as I passed. Here and there were restaurants, the smell of fish and oil their own advertisement. Hungry, I paused in one dark doorway. Inside was cool and dark, the room narrow, an aisle only between tables covered with checked cloths and cheap cutlery. There was no one there and I longed to sit alone and eat my dinner. A woman, ladle in hand, appeared from the back recesses. She had a scarf tied turban-wise on her hair, and she smiled at me, a warm lipless smile.

'*Soupe de poisson*,' she said, as one letting me into a secret.

I smiled at her, sniffed appreciatively, and shook my head.

A little further on I passed through a square, the centre-piece of the town. On the shaded side I stood and looked at it. The sun drained all colour from the houses on two sides; only plants trailing over stone balustrades like a paint-box mosaic broke up the monotony. The windows, the awnings drawn back, looked out with lidless eyes. There were no sounds; only a dog, small, brown and flea-ridden, lifted its leg against a corner and with a wistful twist of his black putty nose, limped like a shadow out of the square and along a street overhung with signs gleaming like guillotines in the filtered light.

Crossing the square I followed the outcast up the street, the main food centre. Like him I paused at each framed stall. Cool cheeses vied with the glutinous red of butcher's meat. Oranges, half-papered, towered above the pale lemons, the transparent red tomato, the celery wreathed about with curly endive. Temptation seized me to touch, to throw the dog a succulent steak, myself a juicy orange; together we would wash it down with wine where the street emptied itself into a shop laden with bottles. Passing my little canine I patted him and left him still wistful, but not without hope.

Before I reached the hotel I saw Madame Seze sweeping the air with her arm. I paused and then saw that she was motioning me to hurry. I ran the last few yards and when I reached the gate she was already there. She blew out her cheeks expressively.

'Monsieur is asking for you. All the time he's asked for you. I say you go for a little walk, a little air, but he say I must look for you. I cook the supper so I cannot search the whole town, I might miss you. But Monsieur Harding he's not satisfied, he say look, look, look.'

Guilt inhibited me, the fact that I had enjoyed an hour separated from Luke, had watched and seen things his eyes had not yet experienced. My freedom left me and was spoilt; the moments had not been worth the price. Madame Seze looked with surprise at my distress. She shook aloft a bottle held in her hand, so that the vitality

from the bottle seemed to run up her arm, or from her arm, to the bottle:

'We'll give Monsieur lots and lots of wine. He will be strong very, very quickly. I see little men become big and brave on the good wine of France. You go and see him now and in a few minutes I bring the supper. He still suffers from shock, I think, poor man.'

I ran quickly up the stairs: at the door I collected myself and walked in slowly. Luke was sitting on a chaise-longue, his eyes fixed on the door. He acted in a strangely betraying way, letting his book slip slowly to his knees, dropping his eyes and clearing his throat loudly.

'You've been a long time,' he said carefully, weighing each word.

'You were asleep, darling, so I went for a breather. I didn't realize that I'd been so long.'

'I missed you.'

'I'm so sorry, darling. I'm longing to show you the town, Luke. It's really lovely, full of people and colour.'

He said, still casual, 'Did you speak to anyone?'

'Not a soul, darling, you know quite well I'm much too shy.'

'I hope you stay that way, at least until I'm better.'

'I'm not likely to change the habit of a lifetime.'

'I don't want to lose my wife.' He forced a heartiness into his voice, trying to make a joke, but it ended on a false note. I went over and brushed my hair, comforted by the reassuring act of the familiar.

Madame Seze came in, bearing our dinner on a huge laden tray. She put it down on the table and, picking the lid off a soup bowl, she held it under Luke's chin, letting the steam damp his nose. He sniffed appreciatively. 'It smells good,' he said.

'It is good,' she said. 'Very good for the strength. Monsieur must eat plenty.' I saw Luke recoil. He hated to be reminded, and assumed the expression of a sulky little boy. To gloss it over, I combed out my brush

quickly, and came over to the table. 'You are kind,' I said and drew the cork from the bottle of wine.

That night Luke went to sleep with his arms tightly round me. It was like being gripped in a vice. I hardly breathed for fear of waking him; I would bear any discomfort rather than run that risk. I lay like a cocoon and tried to forget that I had arms and legs which ached to stretch, a back which tingled to unfold. At last my resistance snapped, and holding my breath I put one foot out of the bed, then the other, then without changing the position of my body, put them both flat on the ground. I lay for several minutes like this, listening to the regular breathing beside me. Little by little I disengaged myself, and taking the Spanish shawl with me I went over to the chaise-longue.

'Sorel, wake up!'

'Hello. Where . . . Oh, hello, darling. What time is it?'

'Does it matter? When did you go over there?'

'When you were asleep. I was fidgety and didn't want to wake you.'

'Come back here, I missed you.'

'Oh Luke, you didn't even know that I'd gone.'

'I did the moment I woke up.'

'Naturally. Anyway it's eight o'clock and high time we got up. Luke, I think I'll start reading aloud to you. It'll help to pass the time.'

'Are you bored?'

'Of course not, but I don't want you to be.'

'Come over here.'

'Oh please, darling . . .'

A fortnight later Luke was still unable to move from the bedroom. He sat on the balcony with me beside him. If I got up for any reason his eyes would follow me round

the room. Sometimes I stood deliberately behind him to see how far he would risk twisting his neck. It was like some ludicrous game. I went for one walk in those two weeks, and came back panting from the exertion of hurrying up the hill. I found Luke, his mouth a bitter twist, trying to drag himself to the bell. His attitude suddenly infuriated me.

'Why couldn't you wait?' I flared at him. 'I've only been a few minutes.'

'It seemed like years. You don't know what it's like sitting here and knowing that you are gallivanting all round St. Tropez.'

'What are you afraid of?' I cried, and could have bitten off my tongue.

'Afraid?' asked Luke coldly.

Madame Seze disapproved strongly of my cloistered life.

'*La petite* should go out more,' she told Luke.

'She'll go if she wants to,' said Luke ungraciously.

'She is getting too pale,' said Madame Seze doggedly.

'Leave her alone,' said Luke, glowering. Offended, Madame Seze shrugged her shoulders. I wanted to smile at her but Luke was watching me. I went and fetched the talcum powder and began to massage his legs. It was part of his treatment. Blindfolded I knew each crook and crevice passed over by my smoothing hands; the way the black hair sprang under my fingers, resilient as daisies. The skin strangely elastic, liquid white, but here and there tea stains where Luke had tried to sunburn the perennially white skin. The hard ridge of bone, the cushioned knees, the feel of dead stuff when I touched his canvas shorts. All round me the smell of the talcum powder, a dusted perfume.

Now Luke said, 'Do you want to go out more?'

Bowing my head over my task I said, 'I'm all right, darling.'

'That isn't answering my question, Sorel. Don't you like being with me? We'll do everything there is to do when I'm better.'

'I know. Of course I like being with you.'

Surprised I saw a tear land on a shiny black hair, straight out of my eye. It rolled slowly, bending the hair under its weight until, reaching the end, it formed a crystal ball and fell splashing into a spray of smaller tears. Others followed and the powder formed wet crumbs under my rubbing palms. I felt Luke's hand on my shoulder and with that touch of sympathy I abandoned myself to weeping, my face between his knees.

'David Scott wants to come and stay for a week or two,' said Luke, lowering the letter he had been reading and looking complacent. I tore my eyes from my father's almost illegible writing and looked at him. He began to butter a croissant and flourished it towards me. 'You remember David! Nice chap.'

'Very nice,' I agreed, putting down my letter and pouring out the coffee. 'When does he want to come?'

'Next week, if we won't feel that he is being *de trop*. It might be rather fun to have him. He plays chess very well.'

I thought about David as I had seen him at our wedding, head and shoulders taller than anyone else. An easy nonchalance about him, and a devastation to most women.

'What happened to his marriage?' I asked. I had heard that it had been disastrous, that she had run away with someone else.

'She was just a little piece,' replied Luke. 'Very pretty, with no morals at all. She soon got fed-up with being married to an impoverished journalist.'

'But I thought he was a very good journalist.'

'This was ten years ago. She didn't wait to see whether he was going to make good or not. She tried to come back to him when he became quite famous, but David wasn't having any. He gets chagrined with easy success, and I think now his interest in women is merely sportive and lasts

just as long as he is doing the pursuing. The moment the object of his interest comes within easy reach he loses interest. He's never happier than when he is after the unattainable. With enormous tact and nicety he disappears in his moment of triumph and leaves the woman still passionately in love with him, and still quite hopeful. The world must be full of women waiting for David to come back.'

'You seem to know him very well.'

'Yes, I've always had an enormous admiration for him. I wish I could be so detached from human affections.'

'I expect he was in love with his wife, and perhaps he still is. It may be just a face he puts on for the benefit of the world. It may have been quite a painful process.'

'I would rather stay as I am in that case. Don't try and give me that medicine, Sorel.'

'Of course not.' I got up and brushed some fallen mimosa flowers into the palm of my hand.

'What does your father write, Sorel?' He looked at the envelope lying on the table.

'Oh, the usual, darling,' I said carelessly, picking it up and tucking it into my pocket. 'How he loathes the summer, what a long time it seems until September and the shooting, and how the heat brings on Mummie's headaches. He really has nothing to do all the summer and gets bored to death. He sometimes takes it out on the pigeons, and then writes long screeds to the *Field* on his method of destruction. Sometimes out of sheer politeness they publish them, and then there's a perfect spate of letters each morning from other pigeon murderers, and Daddie gets as excited as though he were waiting for clandestine meetings. He goes about the house muttering, "decoy", "ridiculous", "two lefts and rights" or "rights and lefts", I'm not sure which. He demonstrates his methods in Mummie's room and, as she can't get away, frightens her to death.'

'He's a great sportsman,' said Luke reprovingly.

'Of course he is, darling, but I never liked killing things.'

Actually my father had written quite a different letter. I had merely given Luke a fair example of his usual epistolary efforts. This one was different.

'Darling,' he wrote, 'I saw your mother-in-law again yesterday, and though she was reluctant to speak of it, I got her to explain more fully the exact nature of Luke's wounds. I must say that it was a thousand pities that I did not see you both before you travelled South. She seems to have great faith in a Doctor Crawford, which I hope is fully justified. I personally would like to feel that everything possible is being done, and would like to take Luke to see my own man in Harley Street on your return.

'The regiment will presumably let him take indefinite leave, as it was an accident.

'Unfortunately your mother saw a report of the accident in the papers, but I have managed to convince her that all is well with you both. She is about the same with her ups and downs . . .'

'I won't suggest a specialist yet,' I thought: Luke was ebulliently happy at the moment and I was afraid to spoil it for him.

I went to the station to meet David. It was easy to pick out his spare loose figure towering above the other travellers. At his side walked a very pretty girl. David had a knapsack over his shoulder, and the girl carried her own suitcase. When he saw me he smiled and began to hurry towards me, and then, remembering, he turned and smiled at the girl, saying something. She looked at me, her mouth sulky, and then, shrugging her shoulders slightly, she turned away. 'Another broken heart,' I thought, amused, pushing through the crowd.

'Sorell!' said David. 'I never thought you'd meet me. How nice! You do look well, and how's that rascal Luke?'

'He's much better I think, David. You'll soon see for yourself.'

'What a ghastly thing to happen! That comes of driving blind with love. I imagine you'll fly next time you two go on a honeymoon. It's much more in keeping.'

That evening we dined on the balcony in our room. We might well have been ten people, judging from the noise. David was a great wine-bibber, and Madame Seze, as though she had guessed, had cooked a very special dinner. Junoesque, liquid-eyed, she served the risotto herself, the air becoming garlicked as she put the minestrone on the table. Unreservedly she laughed and jested with David. She seemed to take possession of the balcony and David as well. Even Luke relaxed and told risky stories, making Madame Seze laugh her loud fruity laugh. I had never seen Luke so gay since the accident; full of wine and good food he put his arms round my neck and David's and bumped our heads together. 'My best friends,' he laughed affectionately. Waxing lyrical, he said, 'The two people I love best in the world. They are like music. Like good food and wine.'

'Come, come,' said Madame Seze, waving her ladle, 'more risotto, it is like a caress to the belly. Like the big love, eh!'

Later, the dinner cleared away, Madame Seze sang to us. It just happened; no one asked her, and it seemed quite natural to have her there leaning against the green shutters, her white blouse tight across her magnificent bosom, her red skirt swishing as she swayed with the rhythm of her song. She leant out and plucked a white jasmine which she tucked into her hair, and sang, *Ah, Que Tu Fais Bien L'Amour*. As she sang she leant towards David: sometimes her hands rested on my bare shoulders, sometimes they bit into my flesh with the intensity of her song. I could see through drowsed eyelids that Cupid was up to his old tricks and that the susceptible Madame Seze was fast falling in love with David. As for David, he watched

her through a haze of tobacco smoke, quite still, but for his hand which reached out for the blue-black bottle to replenish his glass.

'To-morrow,' were David's last words to us that evening, 'we'll take Luke on to the veranda downstairs. It'll be a change for him.'

So the next morning Madame Seze and David between them carried Luke out like a baby in their arms, and David said to me, 'Now off you go and bathe whilst I baby watch.' I looked uncertainly at Luke; his eyes had clouded over but he said with as much good grace as he could muster, 'Run along, Sorel, and enjoy yourself, but don't be too long.'

On winged feet I ran down to the harbour and into the heart of the crescent bay towards St. Maxime. There I found an untenanted strip, bounded by tamarisks, hidden and secret. Flinging myself into my bathing dress, I ran light-heartedly into the iridescent water, which lay like some precious jewel, a sapphire sparkling and changing blue. The first splash, the breaking up of the hard diamond-like surface, the violence of the impact with the water, and then I floated relaxed, lazy, over the surface seaweed, green like the heart of an emerald. Rolling over, I watched the marine life below. Enchanted, sometimes deliciously frightened, as when a jelly-fish, opalescent, moving like a poisonous parachute, would send me scuttling for the edge; or else oozing my way round a rock I would see a whitish speckled tentacle, warning enough to move further away, to watch at a safe distance the evil waving fingers of an octopus. 'If it catches you,' David had told me, 'there is nothing for it but to dive straight down and bite it between the eyes. Only by doing this will you kill it.' I looked with horror at the space between the black sultana eyes, and then afraid of their hypnotic powers I swam away, the water caressing my sides, to where I could watch safely the sea-anemones, all in burnt hues from stained brown to pale pink, rhythmically waving their tendrils. As quickly as I had come, had accepted my

freedom momentarily from David, I wanted to be gone again. A sudden fear that I had left Luke for too long shadowed the morning. I no longer looked around absorbedly, but flung my clothes on my still damp body, and ran my fingers through my hair which clung to my forehead in salt-caked curls. My head down, my feet slipping in their haste, I collided with David, who, to my dismay, was coming from the direction of the harbour. Slowing down unwillingly to walk beside him, I said,

'Oh, David! I thought you were with Luke.' It was an accusation.

'So I was until about ten minutes ago. I've got some friends on a yacht, and went to pay them a visit. They want us to go and have a drink with them this evening. You should come along.'

'I couldn't possibly.'

'Why ever not? It'll do you good.'

'I can't leave Luke, David. He gets so upset.'

'My dear Sorel, you must have a break sometimes. Odette tells me that you've hardly been out since you've been here. That's not good for you, you know. He may take a long time to mend, poor old fellow. What's the extent of the damage?'

'The wheel ran into him. It's ghastly for him.' Embarrassed I twisted my fingers. I hated above all things talking about this.

'Don't look so sad, Sorel. It can't be so serious, darling. I know Luke pretty well. He's as strong as a horse.' He took his pipe out of his mouth and pointed it at me. 'What you need is a bit of life.'

I smiled wanly. 'I'm not as gregarious as you are, David. I'm really all right as I am.'

'Nevertheless, that's what you need. I know.'

At the gate I fingered the bars nervously; the rust fell like fine sand from the iron. 'Will you let me go in first and see how he is?' I said it pleadingly as one who has done wrong and is aware of it.

'By all means, darling, if you want to.'

'And David,' I said, going through the gate, 'will you do something for me?'

'Anything, darling.'

'Don't call me "darling".'

David smiled, a wicked smile, the very quintessence of mischief.

'It's purely functional,' he said.

Odette Seze, a perfect ectoplasm in purple, appeared from the direction of the veranda. She nodded her head vigorously at me and waved her hand to hasten me, or to lift me to her with the force of her arm.

'Hurry,' she murmured in my ear as I hurried past. 'Ah David!' I heard her say in mellifluous tones, as I ran up the steps to Luke.

Luke was angrily plucking vine leaves, with agitated fingers. His eyes, which had been staring through the balustrade on to the courtyard, accepted me but showed no sign of pleasure.

'Have I been very long?' I asked guiltily.

'Hours,' he said ungraciously.

'I'm so sorry, darling. I only bathed once and the time simply flew.'

'For you.'

'I thought David was with you, darling. Otherwise I would have stayed with you.'

'I'd like to murder you.'

'Really, Luke, I've done no harm.'

'I don't care. I shouldn't love such a heartless woman, but I do. But I'd rather you were dead than running away from me.'

'Please, Luke, understand that I was not running away from you.'

I stooped and picked up the chessmen which were spilled over the floor. Luke put his fingers round my neck and shook me angrily. My hair, still damp, stung my eyes into tears; the salt on my lips tasted bitter. 'Let me go, Luke,' I said, this time angry. But he continued to shake me, until my neck ached and my head spun. Twisting

my neck, I bit his hand with all the force I could muster at that angle. He dropped me at once. Stepping out of his reach I looked at him, rubbing my neck with numb fingers.

'You hurt me,' I said disbelievingly.

'I was only fooling,' Luke said viciously, and then suddenly leant back as though he were exhausted. 'It's boredom,' he added as though in explanation.

Fear made me casual. It was not the fear I had felt when I saw the octopus. I straightened the cover over his knees, arranged the chess-board on the table beside him and sat on a stool on the opposite side. 'Shall we play chess?' I asked as one humouring a child.

David came up the steps.

'Luke,' he said, 'the Hunters are here. You remember that fellow who walked all over Dorset with me collecting that material on Hardy. He's coming up to visit you to-morrow. In the meantime he has suggested Sorel and I have a drink with him to-night. He plays the mandolin, and they are quite a good party down there.' He was watching Luke's face intently as he spoke. I too watched Luke. Hysteria was rising in me like a corked fountain ready to gush out.

Luke looked at me. 'Do you want to go?' he asked.

'No, no,' I cried, furious with David. 'Of course I don't want to go.' I could already imagine my evening with Luke's eyes appearing out of the bottom of my glass to accuse me. I would see them in other people's faces beseeching me. To the music of the mandolin I would hear his voice asking me, 'Do you want to go?' as once he had asked me if I really wanted to go on the stage. There was no fun for me belaboured by guilt as I would be.

'You go,' I said to David. 'I'll stay with Luke.'

It took all David's patience and tact, all his wisdom, to achieve what to me was a miracle. He persuaded Luke to let me bathe once a day, to escape for an hour or two from his side whilst David stayed with him or, going down to the numerous people he soon knew, bring them along with

their talk and their easy laughter to entertain him, and to fill the small veranda with the smell of tobacco smoke, the sound of gaiety, the clinking of glasses, the smacking of lips.

Even Luke appreciated the change in me. He would pick up the strands of my hair from my shoulders and rub them between his finger and thumb.

'It's like silk,' he said, 'spun silk.'

'It's the sun,' I would reply, dreamily thinking of my new love, my sun worship. My skin too was an even golden brown. I was no longer conspicuous for my white and pink English skin. Each day my routine was the same; slipping away from the Hôtel des Arbres, walking slowly, regretfully, turning and waving so long as Luke could see me, and then the moment I turned the corner hastening my steps until, by the time I reached the beach, I was running, my hair streaming, my face lifted to the sun's warmth. Always to the same place, to where the rocks, black, brown and slimy green, stretched out like a finger into the sea, half-way to St. Maxime, and to where the tamarisk grew in a horse-shoe and the sparse burnt grass poked its way up through white, slippery sand. Too isolated for the gregarious crowds, it was always deserted, and after bathing I would lie quite naked, covered only by the shadow of the tamarisk which threw a lace-shawl pattern over my sun-kissed skin. Spread-eagled, crucified, I would lie in perfect abandonment, the sun pulsing down on my closed lids, my whole being magnetized towards it. Unconscious of the grit of sand in my back, I yearned upwards, embraced by the heat and warmth, until I seemed to be floating, between earth and heaven, in one warm langorous sensation. So strong did this disembodied feeling sometimes become that, afraid I would open my eyes to the blotted-out golden world, I would turn myself over with a conscious wriggle of my shoulders so that the sun could pour itself out on my less vulnerable back.

'David's staying on another two weeks,' said Luke to me one day, putting his white arm against the brown of my leg and comparing them.

'I'm glad,' I said, thinking only of uninterrupted sun-bathing.

'Odette Seze persuaded him, I don't think we've much to do with it.' Luke laughed. Now that Odette claimed David he was no longer knotted with fear. The leading-rein with which he held me was longer, more silken every day, but ready at a moment's notice to become steel, to tighten. This day when I lingered a little longer at his side, the urgency was over; I could afford a few less moments of my precious freedom. I slipped a lime-green wrap over my white bathing dress. I no longer troubled to dress; the salt water evaporated off me like spirit in the sun. I kissed Luke good-bye; he forgot this day to tell me to hurry. I thought of it when I reached the sea and was comforted.

Slipping out of my wrap, dropping it to look like a piece of flotsam on the beach, I ran down to the cream-edged sea. A cormorant was fishing off the ends of the rocks: I swam out to watch it. Diving under the water I came up so that it was silhouetted above my head against the blue roof of the sky. Dropping like a stone into the lapping water it came up, gulping greedily at a fish. Quite close to me it struggled, retched and finally swallowed. I paddled gently with my hands and looked towards the horizon. Small sails were strung across as though joined by an invisible necklace. Heat haze shimmered and shuddered over the expanse of liquid blue. I imagined the sun, a chimera, galvanizing the sea into stillness and then sucking the whole like a tablecloth snatched up from the middle, tumbling the boats, the bathers, the rocks and the fishes on to the sea-bed like so much dead cutlery. In a flurry of foam, deliciously scared, I crawled to the beach, and ran along the water's edge, lifting my arms in ecstasy as the water dried to salt on my limbs.

I wanted then to run for ever. Away from reality, upwards towards the blue dome of the sky. The sand, unelastic beneath my feet, formed little hard balls between my toes. A crab, hunched like an old man, scurried across

the sand towards the sea: I leapt over it, laughing aloud. St. Tropez, hidden in quivering haze, cleared as I ran towards it, like water suddenly disturbed and then settling, each object in turn becoming clear with immobility, a house red-roofed, a boat anchored, its sails still hoisted, and then small people black and formless moving like ink-stains across the sand. At last I turned, still exuberant, still running, to my tamarisks. Breathlessly I rounded the corner, and still with a foolish smile on my face, all the more foolish because I thought myself alone, I found myself looking down at a man, sitting comfortably on the corner of my wrap. His head was bent over a note-book in which he was busily writing, a foul-smelling pipe stuck out of the corner of his mouth, and by his side a packet of sandwiches and a bottle of wine gave me the impression that he was ensconced for the day. I backed away a little, praying that he had not seen me, but at that moment he lifted his head to look at a larger note-book lying at his feet. It was Paul Maxwell!

'Good-afternoon, Mrs. Harding!' he said imperturbably. By the amusement in his eyes I knew that he had been watching my child-like display of joy. Completely tongue-tied I stood foolishly looking down at him. It was as though some desire in me had surprisingly been answered. I was as shocked as though I had been suddenly transported to a place I half wished for and in murmuring its name found myself there. Time and time again I had smothered my thoughts of Paul Maxwell, as in the same way I had smothered my ambition to go on the stage. In my mind they were synonymous and each, with Luke's accident, equally out of reach.

As though sensing my discomfort, Paul leapt to his feet, and picking up my wrap and shaking out the sand, he held it with a theatrical gesture for me to slip into.

Shrugging myself into it quickly, I turned to see what part he would now play, but he had already returned to his writing. Scribbling, he asked casually,

'And how's your husband?'

'Oh,' I asked ingenuously, kneeling on the sand, 'did you hear about our terrible accident?'

'Of course. It was in the papers. Is he better?'

'Much, thank you, but he can't get about yet. It's very boring for him to be in this lovely place and not be able to enjoy it all. What are you doing here?'

'I followed you!'

Blushing beneath my tan, I said, 'No, seriously, what are you writing?'

'I'm re-writing a Russian play,' he said. 'I'm so glad you chose a quiet spot, I'm getting a lot of work done.'

'I wish you wouldn't tease me.' I felt disconsolate, helpless in my youth, which left me without wisdom to assess the truth behind his words. 'I'm disturbing you,' I added. 'I'd better go.'

I rose and walked to the edge of the tamarisks. I heard his voice raised behind me.

'Won't you share my picnic, since I've taken it upon myself to share your wrap?'

His voice mocked very gently. He had risen, standing poised, but his eyes no longer mocked. He was looking at me keenly as though absorbing each hair of my head, each pore of my skin. I felt uncertain how to behave. His presence, the mention of a play, excited me. To play for time I pointed towards his meagre picnic.

'You haven't enough for two.'

'Wait,' he said and, turning, went into the bushes behind him, reappearing suddenly like a faun over the top of them, waving in his hands a bunch of grapes and two oranges.

'Will that be enough for Madame?' he asked, laying the spoils at my feet.

I bent and picked up the bunch of purple grapes, plucked one off and popped it into my mouth.

'This is all I want,' I said, kneeling down in the hot sand once more. 'I mustn't stay long, only long enough for you to tell me about the play.' And I waved the grapes towards his book.

He opened the packet of sandwiches and, pouring out some wine, handed me the glass. I took a sip and handed it back to him.

'No more,' I said cautiously.

Munching sandwiches, he told me about himself, the play, his whole fascinating world. The play had been badly translated and when he had worked on it he hoped to put it on in London the following winter. He told me about the characters in the play and who he hoped would play them. I listened to him spell-bound, I ate grapes and forgot to spit out the pips! He hoped to be here for the summer and to write most of the time. He had been lent a small flat in St. Tropez. People came and went, staying odd nights and passing on, mostly of the acting profession. It belonged to a philanthropic friend of his who was seldom there but who employed a cook to look after his friends. I couldn't have chosen a more convenient place to come, he told me. He smiled and said,

'And what are you going to do, Ophelia?'

Asked suddenly what I intended to do by such a fulfilled person left me lost. What indeed could I do? My obvious duty lay in nursing Luke back to health. In my spare moments I would bathe, lie in the sun, but none of it seemed very important, nor indeed had it ever been so, still less now. There was none of it which I wished to discuss with him. I would have liked to have been able to tell him of my ambition to go on the stage, of my pact with Luke that I should do so after we were married. But I did not want to angle for sympathy, he might so easily misconstrue and think that I was another little soubrette trying to get a job. To change the conversation I asked him to give me a jasmine flower from his buttonhole, and held out my hand for it. Amused and a little puzzled, he handed it to me; it was limp with the heat, but its petals felt cool and soft against the skin of my fingers.

'I'm not going to do anything,' I said, 'and I know nothing except a little about these,' and I touched the flower gently with my lips. 'Do you know about these?'

'No,' he said. 'Tell.' He relit his pipe, but his eyes never left my face.

I held the flower between my finger and thumb by its calyx and peeled the petals down so that it looked like a sad little débutante. I pointed at the cream and green pistil.

'This,' I said in a schoolmistress voice, 'is called the pistil. It's divided into three. The stigma, this little pin-like top, the style, the stalk in the middle, and at the bottom the ovary where eventually the seeds appear. When a bee passes,' I turned the thumb of my free hand and hummed it through the air over the flower, 'or sips the honey it has pollen from another flower on its legs, and a little seed of pollen will land with all probability on the stigma. This seed sends out a little threadlike tube which passes down inside the style and thus into the ovary which is fertilized. It's so simple and neat, don't you think?' Absorbed with my flower I didn't look at him until he took the flower out of my hand. Amusement was flirting with tenderness on his face, or was he wondering why I told him this?

He said, 'It's fascinating. I know nothing about flowers. Only the park plants of London and they've only grown and blossomed for me, nothing more. You must teach me all you know.'

'I really know very little,' I said, suddenly shy.

'Please,' he said gently.

'Perhaps you would like to know how seeds are carried to new ground, by the birds, by the wind, by water, by their hooks as in the case of burrs and goosegrass. I love to think of the various ways a seed has of travelling, and of the carriers unconscious of their extra burden, a bird for instance in so many ways like an aeroplane but carrying life instead of destruction, life which must live, so much energy stored up in tiny space. I would love to see and understand all the things that go on out of our sight, to be conscious of nature all the time: then people would become unimportant to one; one could live in a dream magicked

by small things. Sometimes when someone is saying something tremendously important to me, I notice a piece of dandelion fluff on their clothes. Then I cease to hear what they are saying, wonder where it came from and where it will go. It's not very flattering to the speaker but that's the way my mind works.' Realizing that I was telling him about myself, I blushed and paused. 'Then,' I said, 'there is the classification of flowers.'

'Yes,' he said, 'there would be.'

Looking at him, with his hands clasped lightly round his knees, I noticed his watch, a huge dial on his wrist. My hand flew to my throat, I jumped to my feet, I had been three hours away from Luke, one hour longer than usual.

'I must go,' I said, suddenly breathless.

'Why must you go?' he asked, not moving.

'My husband.' I plucked a piece of tamarisk and rolled it nervously between my fingers. 'My husband hates being left.'

'I'm not surprised,' he said sincerely.

'He's sweet, but he gets easily bored.'

'You look too young to be shut up all day.'

'Oh but I'm not!' I cried too eagerly. 'Really, I'm not. I'm often out. It's he who is to be pitied.'

I moved away, impatient to be gone, my face troubled. I stubbed the sand with my toe.

'When shall I see you again?' he asked, perfectly matter-of-fact.

'I don't know,' I said, my heart racing ahead of me over the sand.

'Will you have a drink with me this evening? I want to know more about wild flowers.'

'Not this evening,' I said too quickly.

'Then I'll see you when you next come here to bathe.' He said it peacefully, accepting as once before the inevitable. He leant back in the sand and lifted his hand to me in a gesture of farewell.

'Good-bye,' I said hurriedly, and began to run. When I was about to turn a corner I paused and looked back. He

was standing watching me, just a head and shoulders *bushed round by green fronds which moved with continual motion, not a breeze but the heat-haze quivering and amoeba-like blurring the outlines.* I waved once and ran on.

'I shall be here, don't you worry,' David said to me the next day. 'Off you go for your bathe, little one.'

My heart unquiet, I found a hundred and one things to delay me. I fussed round Luke with new-born attention. Could he reach his glass? Then I would put it nearer. Perhaps the blind was not down far enough? I would let it down, so. The chess-board, his cards? Yes, I knew David would give them to him, but I wanted to be sure. What a horrid book! Should I get another? No? Then I must get the papers from Odette, I was sure that I had seen the postman bring them that morning. Was he sure that he was eating enough fruit? I had seen some lovely green luscious figs in the market yesterday. It wouldn't take me a minute to fetch them. 'Oh, Luke darling!' I nearly cried aloud. 'Why don't you stop me going to the beach to-day?' Why don't I tell him about Paul Maxwell? I could amuse him with the story of our first meeting. But mightn't this second meeting make him suspicious? Mightn't he read design into what was mere chance? He might easily stop me, saying, 'You mustn't go on the beach again, Sorel, if you pick up comparative strangers. It isn't really safe. You must stay with me, and when I'm well we'll go to the beach together. We can't have Mrs. Harding talking to theatrical types and, what's more, meeting them again.' But then, I reasoned, I needn't go to the same spot on the beach. There are hundreds of others and even if they are not nearly so quiet or so lovely, I won't run the risk of meeting Paul again and feeling guilty every time I look at Luke. Yes! That's what I'll do—bathe where all the other people bathe to-day, and to-

morrow I will find that the imperious Paul has left my *tamarisks to me again.*

My unbearable sensitiveness calmed. I was hiding nothing, and I kissed Luke with sudden warmth and relief.

'Good-bye, darling,' I said.

He fingered the back of my neck gently.

'I always think your neck will snap in my fingers like the stalk of a flower,' he said, reluctant to let me go.

'It's very much tougher.' I laughed and sat on the arm of his chair, easing out my new-found peace.

'Don't be long,' he said, at length letting me go.

I ran down the stairs two at a time, bumping into Odette carrying a tray up to Luke.

'La, la, the little one looks all flushed to-day. What's happened, darling? Have you found a treasure?' She pushed the weight of the tray against the wall and looked at me. She treated me with an easy familiarity which infuriated Luke but which I liked; only at this moment I found it inconvenient.

I nibbled the leaves of a globe artichoke from her tray and dipped them daintily into the vinaigrette sauce; she smacked my hand playfully.

'It's only,' I said, wiping my fingers with my handkerchief, 'that it's such a beautiful day.'

'And if I tell you that it has been the same weather for weeks!'

'I shall deny hotly that it's ever been quite so lovely,' I said, laughing and running down the stairs.

'It's very dangerous suddenly to notice the weather,' shouted Odette at my retreating back.

Out of St. Tropez, where people bathed, if indeed they bathed there at all and not at the much more beautiful beach of Thaiti a few miles out, the beach was like a small pocket handkerchief, unlaundered, smudged over with grubby rocks, gritty stones and carelessly strewn sea-weed. I picked my way carefully over prone brown bodies to the water's edge, and swam a little way out. My knee scraped against sharp rocks. I moved rapidly away and my toes

recoiled against more rocks, more jagged edges. I lost my nerve and swam back to the shore. Picking up my wrap I moved away towards the bay, no intention yet of going there, but away from people, away from rocks which hurt. I would wander just so much further, I thought, leaping *lightly over dimpled bodies two at a time. The beach juggled and danced tantalizingly before me; only the sky was domed over with stillness.* The people thinned out as I walked on, like straggly houses at a town's edge; soon there was no one; only my tamarisks came into view. I decided to swim far out and see just once if my bay was occupied. If it was I could swim back; if not, no harm would be done. The water was like silk caressing my sides; I was conscious of it all over me, thin over my legs and my back, deep and shaded under my belly and thighs, it teased my hair and lifted it from my forehead. I suddenly became conscious of the feel of things, a new awareness of myself as an individual. My aloneness in the teeming warm richness of nature went to my very heart. And yet I did not know then why I was so suddenly alive, balanced as I was on the very edge of life. I wanted to remain there in that moment for ever. I thought that I would never feel so alive, so vibrant again. I lay quite still in the water, letting it cradle me: only my feet moved gently to keep me afloat. The current carried me down, and I was still dreaming, still believing myself cherished by the same piece of water when I heard a shout from the shore. Treading the water, blinking it out of my eyes, first unfocused, a mere active smudge on my lens, I saw him waving to me. I was exactly opposite the bay. And when I brushed my eyes with my hand I saw it all; the picnic a neat white speck, packeted in the distance, the metallic gleam of a bicycle wheel against the coppery green, and there, waving and as far as I could tell smiling at me, was Paul at the water's edge. Ruefully I waved, but to him I must have looked perfectly natural. He had asked me to come and I had come. Had I wanted to come so much

that I had controlled the current? Had I been so oblivious of my destiny?

'Why don't you bathe?' I shouted.

'I thought you were never coming,' he shouted and turned back towards the shade.

I kicked myself under the water and swam until I felt myself landed on the beach, the sun scorching my back.

'Why not bathe?' I said again as I reached his side.

'I have,' and he pointed to his bathing drawers. 'Next time, though, I'll wait for you.'

'I won't eat,' I said as he began to spread the food, a double quantity of sandwiches this time, I noticed.

'Please. I brought them for you. They're pâté and quite good.'

'Just one then,' I said reluctantly and sipped the wine he passed me.

'About these flowers,' he began.

'No, not flowers now,' I interrupted hastily. 'Tell me about the stage. Anything you tell me will be like manna.'

He didn't answer me at once but ate in companionable silence, his eyes on the sea. I ate my sandwich and reached for another. Afterwards I wiped my fingers carefully in the sand and lay down to sunbathe. He still ate in silence, but occasionally he looked at me and smiled. It was a warm quiet smile, as though to tell me that he knew I was there.

'You should act,' he said suddenly.

I turned my face from him to hide the pleasure his words brought me.

'I'd like to,' I said, my voice muffled.

'When your husband's better you must try,' he said. 'I'd love to see you in Barrie.'

'Margaret, I'd love to play Margaret!' I cried, excited.

'One day you shall. I'll produce *Dear Brutus* and you shall play Margaret. But make it soon, before you're touched.'

'Touched?'

'By life! You're so gloriously untouched. Oh, if you knew the weary people I meet in my work!'

He lay back on his elbow, his eyes still on the sea, matching it for blueness and depth. I kept my peace; it was a tranquil moment and I knew he would tell me more.

'Have you read Tchekhov?' I shook my head. 'You should. For a long time I have tried to pattern my life, my character, on his. His gentleness, one of the greatest of all qualities, I have tried to emulate. Also his singleness of purpose. But most of all his compassion. He looked very deeply into life in his middle years, having developed slowly in youth. He undertook a ghastly journey once just to write a book about the conditions of convict life. It made a great impression and reforms were made. So far I have only achieved a play about the death of society as we know and understand it, and the evils of war. Not much in thirty-six years, I fear.'

'A great many people fail even to do as much as that,' I put in gently, but he shook his head and sighed.

'Perhaps like Donne I need to see the light. It took him thirty years of chaotic living, living like a libertine, and then the change, the conversion, and the whole essence of his poetry changed. So much more beautiful it became, so much more beautiful when he became contemplative, though the desire lived on, the desire for perfect beauty. He was the mystic of mystics.'

' "Wilt thou forgive that sinne by which I have wonne
Others to Sinne? and made my sinne their doore?
Wilt you forgive that sinne which I did shunne
A year or two; but wallowed in, a score?
What thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.' "

I whispered.

'Ah, you know him?'

'But have never understood him. I don't know why his poetry changed.'

Paul told me about Donne; he told me about the Sonnets.

From there he drifted on to his ambitions for a State Theatre—'the site is already chosen in Kensington'. I lay with my eyes closed, absorbed and happy. Sometimes I looked up at him against the sun; the hot midday sun accentuated the cheek-bones, shining with thin sweat, throwing deep hollows beneath them.

It was an attractive face, but not one which depended on its bone structure. It would still be attractive when the flesh was stretched and marbled with age: it was something which shone from inside: like a light it drew and attracted. Like all thinkers his eyes looked inwards as well as out and gave one the feeling of depth, an exciting impression at the best of times and to one as young as myself dangerous as it can be false. His hands were long and thin and he used them with grace. Indeed all his movements were graceful, so that one was inclined to watch him as a movement, a continuation of nature. He flowed and synchronised whilst other people appear to move in staccato thrusts alien to the more natural things around them. This way of moving was taught at no dramatic school, but was as natural to him as the way his thick black hair grew, or the way sudden laughter bubbled up inside him.

After some time he stopped talking. I lay on my back, watching a sea-gull, a white speck in the sky with rose-tinted edges, swooping and gliding, sometimes small like a snowflake, then flattening like a saucer. I lay with my arms shading my eyes, one little finger like salt in my mouth.

'What are you thinking about?' asked Paul at last.

'All those things,' I replied drowsily.

'What things?' said Paul, looking up at the sea-gull.

'Those things, like the stage, the poets, Donne, Yeats, the sonnets, all the music of the world, the writers of prose, the ballet. Oh, you know all the lovely things. I think I'm missing them.'

'You're too young to have missed anything yet,' said Paul reasonably. 'You'll have them all in time.'

'I want to do them,' I said, sitting up, the sand showering

out of my hair like stinging rain. 'There are quite enough spectators.'

'Not intelligent ones,' said Paul. 'Besides, what's to stop you doing anything if you really want to?'

'I'm married,' I said sombrely, like one saying 'I'm dead.'

Paul laughed delightedly, as one would at a small delightful child who will keep tumbling down and stubbornly getting up again.

'Sorel,' he said, 'you don't know that you're alive. Come now, you can be useful. I'm setting some Rimbaud to music and you shall help me.'

He picked up his note-books and flicked over the pages. He pulled out some music paper, on which was written in small neat writing:

'O saisons, ô châteaux,
Quelle âme est sans défauts?
O saisons, ô châteaux,
J'ai fait la magique étude
Du bonheur, que nul n'étude.'

'That will do to begin with,' said Paul. 'Now, Sorel, listen to this.'

He hummed under his breath and began to write notes between the lines above the poem. I watched over his shoulder enthralled. I too began to hum the tune as slowly it began to take shape.

'O vive lui, chaque fois
Que chante le coq gaulois.'

'Hummmm,' went Paul. Pencil poised, he looked for inspiration towards the sea.

'Ah, ahhhh,' he sighed and wrote a few more notes. I breathed them softly into his ear. Then pointing with his pencil we went through the whole song together, ending in a crescendo.

I clapped my hands in real delight.

'It's lovely,' I cried. 'How clever you are!'

Paul threw me a copy of Rimbaud lying beside him.

'Find me some more to do,' he said, smiling.

'Why only Rimbaud?' I asked. 'Why not Verlaine or even Baudelaire?'

'Verlaine perhaps. Not Baudelaire,' said Paul lightly, humming and jotting, jotting and humming.

I lay on my tummy and rippled the pages of Rimbaud. I was perfectly happy, perfectly at peace. Luke no longer lay on my conscience. For the moment he was blotted out, eclipsed. Something inside me deep down was released; Paul had released it by talking of the things I loved. How perfect relationships could be, how unruffled, how happy! What exciting journeys of the mind I could make with Paul; what a lot he could teach me! I imagined watching rehearsals by his side. Luke was a shadowy figure beside us: I felt somehow that he would be there always listening with admiration to our brilliant conversation. Amused, benevolent. One day perhaps Paul would dedicate a book to me: 'To Sorel, my friend, who has by her sympathy made this book possible.' A shadow fell across the page of my book and across my dreams.

'A penny?' said Paul, leaning over me. I screwed my eyes against the sun as I looked up at him and wondered how long he had been thus poised. My serenity left me; in its place was uncertainty, something akin to fear, and a breathlessness which frightened me.

'I've chosen some poems,' I lied, hastily rising to my feet. 'What's the time, please?'

'Three o'clock,' said Paul, watching me without moving.

'Oh!' I cried aghast, 'I'm terribly late again.' I threw the book on to the sand, where Paul picked it up absent-mindedly.

'When shall I see you again?' asked Paul.

'I don't know,' I said, my anxiety to be gone no real part of me, but bringing tears to the surface of my eyes.

'This evening?'

'No, no.'

'To-morrow then?'

'You must meet Luke,' I said desperately.

'That would be delightful.'

'Good-bye, and thank you for the picnic.'

'It was a pleasure. I'll see you to-morrow then. Good-bye, Sorel.'

This time he didn't get up to see me go but, picking up his book, went on working.

For a week I met Paul every day. Afraid of a broken spell I never mentioned him to Luke. I was not sure whether I could bear it if he told me that I must never see him again, or if alternatively I had to share him with a third person. The moments were too precious, charged as they were with our common interests. Our relationship passed from shyness, and on my side awkwardness, to absolute ease and friendship. In between seeing him I would store up in my mind things to tell him, so that by the time he came in view over a sand dune or round the tamarisks, the words would already be tumbling out of my mouth. We would pick up conversations left off the day before with perfect ease, as though we had never parted. I believe that he too was eager to talk, to impart his knowledge, and part of himself, to me. The empty hot air became filled with our voices, our excited vibrant voices. 'Paul, Paul, I've just thought . . .' I would begin, throwing my brown body on the sand. Or, 'Sorel, did I tell you about the time I played Hamlet for the first time?' 'No, my dear, it was comic. I began to cry and couldn't stop, I was really so sad, and the audience thought it was a magnificent performance and cheered their heads off. The next day I was made to play Polonius.'

One day at the end of the week a little black leather-bound book fell out of his writing-case. I picked it up and idly began to flick over the pages. It was an address book and I had no business to read it, but the devil was in me.

'Tell me about all these people, Paul,' I said, burning with curiosity. Some addresses had been written many years ago and the ink was green and faded. Some had been hastily written in by the owners of the names and

addresses, quickly perhaps at a party, ending in tadpole scrawls, a flourish, a squiggle, a firm dot as though to say, 'There, let's see where that leads us.' Some were written by men in small precise writing, laboriously, like children, I thought, with their tongues licking their lips with concentration. There was a perfect mosaic of coloured inks: pink, green, blue, blue-black, even mauve.

I opened the book at random.

'Who is Miriam Foster?'

'A girl I knew in Dublin.'

'Nice girl?'

'So, so.'

'What do you mean by so, so?'

'It depends what you mean by nice.'

'I mean attractive, pleasant, kind. You know what I mean.'

'She was very attractive.'

'Were you in love with her?' I surprised myself with this question.

'Yes.'

'Oh.' I felt sick and desolate as though I had suddenly come face to face with waste land. I plodded through the book; there seemed nothing else to do. Paul had been in love with a great many of the writers of paint-box ink.

At the end, after a Miss White, and a Miss Wyman, with both of whom Paul had had amorous adventures, and finding no Miss Xeno, I closed the book with a sharp flip and threw it into his lap.

'You are a positive Don Juan,' I said coldly, playing with my rings, tossing them into the air and retrieving them from the sand.

'No, Sorel, just lonely.'

'Lonely?' I scoffed.

'Yes, lonely, Sorel, and permanently disappointed. There are all forms of loneliness, you know. In the very centre of a gathering of friends one can suddenly feel overwhelmingly bleak and bereft. The air becomes full of echoes, not voices any more, just the repetition of things

said over and over again, coming back to one over the years and quite meaningless. One suddenly wants to shout "Stop!", to beseech them to say something that really matters, or else to leave one alone so that one doesn't have to see as well as feel one's loneliness, one's utter futility. You think because I know a great many people that I cannot be lonely? Do you know yet the disappointment, the disillusionment of finding out that some person whose friendship you value, with whom perhaps you have thought yourself in love, is like all the rest, lacking in that one quality you need, the one thing which will keep you always together? I can't even tell you what that quality is; I've never found it in anyone; after a time, with all my relationships I find that feeling of frustration setting in: a chance remark will annoy, a habit you may have never noticed before will suddenly begin to irritate. Maybe it is *something lacking in myself. I may be intolerant, unfair, over-critical: perhaps everyone faces disillusionment at some time and either doesn't admit it, or lives it down, keeping it in those corners of their minds, the corners even the most prosaic of us must have, which are pigeonholed "unsafe", where are docketed all our free inclinations, our longing for irresponsibility, for running away from our ties, our good citizenship, the feelings which if we followed would make us run amok, break down the whole organization of civilization. Ah, Sorel, perhaps you're too young to know what it is to recognize it when you meet it face to face.'*

I thought of Luke.

'No,' I said, 'I don't think I'm too young.'

'I'm married, you know, Sorel,' said Paul, continuing his own train of thought. 'Sarah and I thought we'd found the very thing we both wanted. It took three years before we'd admit it was all a mistake. Then, like two perfectly logical human beings, we both went our ways. At first that had the power to hurt, so there must have been some residue left, or perhaps whilst I was with Sarah I was anchored and gave up my search for perfection. It was

restful. And then I suddenly found myself adrift once more, wondering and bewildered.'

'And you've never found this thing that you want?' I said it more for something to say than because I expected an answer.

'The very core of another being, yes I think I have.'

Something infinitely tender in his voice made me turn and look at him. And looking at him and seeing, really seeing him for the first time, my eyes fell instantly, for though he had put out no hand to touch me his eyes were like two points of fire burning into my flesh. I trembled as though it were cold, and he said 'Sorel' very softly; and dragging my eyes heavy-lidded and aching I looked into his eyes and knew that I loved him completely. When I had begun to love him I could never tell: perhaps it was the very first day, when, excitingly remote, he had played Hamlet; perhaps only at this moment did the little germ take life; but the realization made me tremblingly weak and exhausted. He was sitting some distance from me, the disturbed and folded sand, crumpled like a thrown cloak, between us, but now he got up and walked towards me and, kneeling in the sand, he took my hands in his. He gently drew me towards him, all the while whispering my name very softly, 'Sorel, Sorel, Sorel.' Over his shoulder I saw the sky, the green tamarisks, the wheeling gulls, merging into a swirling whole. Then the sand, always slippery and treacherous, seemed to glide away from under me, and my body held in Paul's arms seemed to swim up to meet him, gentle and unresisting to match his gentleness. He kissed me slowly, unpassionately, and yet consciously I felt the sweetness of his lips, the tenderness to be gathered only by each other. I lay quite passive in his arms, no longer trembling and tense, but resting in his love. I felt that I did not want to move but to cling to this moment for ever. To move quickly would jar; to speak would break a spell. Life was suddenly so sweet that the whole essence of it cried out for slowness.

At last, still keeping my hand in his, he released me, and

lying full length in the sand he looked into my face, long and intently.

'Sweetness,' he said.

'Paul,' I said wonderingly.

'Yes, my heart's darling?'

'Paul, I'm afraid.'

'Why, sweetheart?'

'Paul, I'm afraid and I'm happy. I'm happy now, darling.'

'I love you, Sorel.' And he bent and kissed my hair.

'Paul, I love you, and yet I don't want to.'

'It's as it is, my darling. We love, nothing can change that for us.'

My body was like fluid against him and when again he kissed me an aching longing mounted like a flame through me. We lay in close contact, our bodies strained together, my arms tight round him, the tips of our tongues contacting and tasting the honeyed sweetness of the other. Lifting his head he caressed my cheek, moved the hair from my ear and nibbled it with his lips. I had almost reached the limit of feeling, the limit of my control, and only by a super-human effort did I break free and struggle to my feet.

Almost as soon as my feet touched firm earth, as soon as the world came once more into perspective, so Paul caught me round the waist, and as with hands scarcely steady I tried to tie the cord of my wrap, he in one movement flung me across his knee which he had raised whilst kneeling on the other, and began to kiss my throat, my lips, my hair, with none of the control, the passivity which he had previously shown. My whole being became one longing ache for him. I moved my lips against his, and the future became as inevitable as death. 'O, Paul,' I murmured in a breathless child's voice, 'O, Paul!' 'You are so sweet,' he whispered, 'so very sweet.'

It was Paul who found control; it was Paul who released me as suddenly as he had snatched me to him. He suddenly lowered his knee, dropping me as gently as a moth's wing on to the sand.

'I love you too much for this, my darling. Too much. Let's make it perfect together, but not here. Come to me of your own free will. Come to me to-night, my own darling.'

'I can't think when you're near me,' I cried. 'Oh, Paul, I can't think clearly. You must help me to think.'

'I love you, Sorel, love you with every part of me. Come to me, darling.'

'If I do, then let it be to-morrow at the time I usually see you. If I don't come to the flat you'll know it is because I'm afraid, not because I don't love you. With you not there, I may not have the courage.'

'I shall pray for your courage.'

We gathered up our scattered belongings. Each time we bent near each other our fingers met, clung and parted. We eked out the time in slowness. Unable to part, we left the bay together, bumping Paul's bicycle over the sand-dunes, his arm round my shoulders. My feet skimmed the road; I felt only my heart singing, touched as I was by magic.

At the edge of the town we unwillingly moved away from each other. Paul turned me towards him and put the roundness of my cheek into the hollow of his.

'You see, darling, it fits,' he said. It was to become our most loving gesture in the time to come.

He wrote his address on a slip of paper, and then kissing me without a word he jumped on his bicycle and rode down the hill, sending up a puff of white dust, the only sound the crisping of his tyres on the road, the whispering of the burnt-out long grass by the wayside. All still and alone, I read the address on the piece of paper, and then very slowly I tore it up into tiny pieces, holding them on the palms of my hands until the oven-hot breeze gently lifted them and fluttered them to the road, and from the road to the sidings where they flattened momentarily against the stalks of the grass, before they drifted further to a ditch, to the stubbled field beyond. 'Now I shall forget the address,' I thought to myself. 'Now I shall not be able

to go even if I want to.' But as I ran down the hill the air itself seemed to be whispering it in my ear, the leaves repeated it, and the hot blue sky fanned it back to me; and far away on a thin sliver of a cloud, floating above the sun I saw it quite clearly written in letters of gold.

For always I shall remember the sitting-room in Paul's flat, as I saw it the first afternoon that I went there. The shutters were drawn against the hot sun, so that the whole room including Paul was shadowed in stripes of dusty grey and pale sun-gold. The sofa and two chairs were covered in a thick striped material, the stripes almost made indistinguishable by the oblique light from the shuttered windows; only near the floor, as though appearing out of a fog, they took shape, fanning out strongly in lines of white and cobalt blue. The white walls were relieved by the curtains in the same material and by the satiny black furniture, which glowed with reflected light. A bookcase ran hip high the length of one wall; full of thumb'd paperbacks, it was the only disorderly corner of the room. A black piano stood behind the door, with music piled neatly on top. A stool, green, velvet-topped, with faded yellow patches, stood in front with splayed solid legs. The carpet, dun-coloured now, had been white. Here and there long pieces of thread straggled out over the wainscoting. The pictures were good prints, mostly impressionist; a Dali horse, the only original, had the place of honour over the fireplace. By the fireplace itself, its ugly black summer's mouth filled with maidenhair fern, hiding in places the biscuit-coloured tiles, stood a low table on which was a typewriter, and as though permanently in readiness it was already filled with clean white paper. Crowding it stood a tall thin bottle of hock, a strip of light casting a spark on its slender curve, and beside it, resting lop-sided on a ceramic dish, were sandwiches, the top one drying in the heat, curling upwards to show its green lettuce edge.

I do not remember if we ate the sandwiches. I only remember the trembling of my knees as I walked up the narrow stairs; how, when I was still peering for the bell, the door opened as though Paul had been listening for my step in the tiny hall behind. His hand steadied my arm as I walked in as though he knew I needed his strength. The room is imprinted with startling clarity in my brain and the bitter taste of hock on my tongue. No words passed between us; we only had at that moment the language of our hearts. I remember Paul kneeling at my feet and suddenly taking my hand with great urgency, great demand.

Another room, a momentary terror before I was engulfed in great waves of feeling, a thousand sea-shells in my ears as Paul inexorably overcame the slightest resistance, until our bodies throbbed in unison; a memory of laughing aloud, of crying, and of a great longing to die now at this moment. Of such happiness that an hour became a moment, two people one person.

Later I remember opening my eyes drugged with sleep. Paul was bending over me looking into my face. I could scarcely distinguish his features, but the shutters clothed his body in a convict suit.

'What happy, happy eyes,' he murmured. 'How I adore my little golden goddess.'

I cupped his face in my hands; tears of happiness trickled from the corners of my eyes on to the pillow.

'Oh my Paul, Paul, Paul,' I said, lingering over his name. And then with sudden fierceness I pulled him towards me . . .

Later, drowsily talking, we told of the little things which had made up the pattern of our lives, the small feelings and happenings which had at first seemed unimportant but which now gained momentum for the telling. We talked of our loving and being loved, of what attracted us in each other, why we loved the one, and no one else, of the inevitableness of our love without end. Paul laid the burden of responsibility upon me. Born of a faithless father, he

feared his inheritance. The urge for change was in him too; his fickleness distressed him; he craved stability and sureness.

'I'm afraid, Sorel,' he said, putting his head on my shoulder. 'I need you to safeguard me against myself.'

'How can I help where others have failed?'

'You will, darling, you will. I've never felt quite like this before. If you can't keep me then no one can.'

'Paul, will you promise to be always quite honest with me?'

'I'd never be able to hide anything from you, my love.'

As I was leaving he said, 'Meet me for a drink, heart's darling. I can't bear to be parted from you for so many many hours. Please come.'

'It's so difficult, darling, so terribly difficult. Wait for me at the café this end of the quay, the Café Anglais. Wait half an hour from nine o'clock. If I don't come only my heart can be with you.'

'I want you with me always, Sorel.'

'I want to be with you always, Paul.'

'Bless you, my tender darling.'

'Bless Paul.'

One moment my cheek to his and then I ran.

Entering the square, swiftly on happy feet, I saw David at the farther side and pulled up sharply. I could not bear to be seen with my flushed transparent face and drew into the shade of a wall. David was taking photographs, with all the keenness and absorption of the keen photographer. At one moment leisurely, perhaps on one knee, he would take a small child, smiling ingratiatingly, holding out a hand in which was small change to gain the child's confidence. The child, beaming, would more often than not climb on to David's knee. It was not what he wanted; with gentle hands he would place it on the pavement in front of him, pointing conspiratorially at his camera.

Sometimes with astounding swiftness he would turn in his path to someone walking behind him and take them before they could protest, or the look of surprise transfigure their expression. At last he pointed his camera straight up into the air and took the masts of yachts, with their fluttering pennons. *After that he looked round anxiously, searching for something or someone he could not find, and in looking with piercing questing eyes he found me in my shadowed hiding-place.*

'Sorel, God's truth! The very person!'

I walked out to meet him, feeling my secret naked before me.

'Hold it, Sorel. Keep walking quite naturally towards me, but for Christ's sake smile, girl . . . There, the very person I needed, just in the nick of time.'

'Whatever are you doing, David?'

'I'm doing "Faces in the Sun" for *Picture Pictorial*, and I needed my cover girl. You are just the type.'

'You are not to put my face on the cover, David. David, I've been thinking, can't you stay any longer?'

'No, darling Sorel, I can't.' He took my arm and together we began to stroll in the direction of the hotel. David, looking at the ground, appeared to be in deep thought for a few moments, or as though he were trying to make up his mind to say something to me. At last he said, whilst our feet swayed with the slowness of our movement, 'Sorel, I think Luke should see a specialist. I have spoken to him about it and he appears to think it a good idea. If you came back with me I could help you with the journey.'

'Go back?' I couldn't keep the dismay out of my voice, and the arm David held became stiff. All my happiness melted from me. The washed houses danced before me: I saw everything through a blue-tinted bubble, quivering and distended, as tears pricked the backs of my eyes. The ruts and deep hoof-marks of wheels and oxen made my feet stumble; a chicken distressed by my clumsiness squawked and floundered away from its dust

bath. I turned my head from David, but he sensed that something was wrong.

'What's the matter, Sorel?'

'Nothing, David, except he seems so happy here that it seems a pity to move him.'

'Darling girl, he'll never get better until he sees someone good. It's all being very hard on you both. I want you to know that I do realize it and that if there is ever anything I can do for either of you . . . Well, there it is.'

The idea of going home began to worry me dreadfully. I thought of being alone with Luke again, in endless consulting rooms, in ceaseless conversations on the possibilities of a new specialist advised by yet another person. I felt panic-struck when I thought of separating from Paul, and yet I knew in my heart of hearts that I must put Luke first, that I must never let Paul make me fail in my duty. Duty, I thought, how dreary it sounds! I heard David's voice telling me how quickly Luke might be cured. But I don't want him cured, not like that, not as a husband, anything but that. Let him be well, by all means. Let him go about, but not that. Don't ever let him want me again as his wife. I couldn't bear it, not now. Now that I belong to Paul. God, what thoughts am I thinking? What depths of wickedness are there in me?

Luke's voice surprised me. He had been moved to the front of the house and could see us long before we could see him, hidden as he was by the traceries of overhanging vines. When I left the hotel I could feel his eyes in my back until I turned the corner, and when I returned he seemed never to have moved but to have his face still pressed like a faithful dog in the same direction, looking for the first sign of my wrap as I came slowly in sight again.

'Hi, you two!'

Ashamed of my thoughts I hastened my steps and waved. My sense of guilt made me overwhelm Luke with endearments. I perched on the arm of the chaise-longue and put my hand on his shoulder. If it were Paul I would ruffle his hair: try as I would I could not put my fingers through

Luke's thick dark hair any more. He took my hand and pressed it against his cheek.

'How did the tanning go?' he asked.

'I walked to-day instead,' I lied.

'You might just as well have stayed with me,' said Luke.

'I hear you want to go home with David,' I said abruptly, changing the subject.

David was leaning out over the balcony. When I said this he turned and looked at Luke quizzically. I thought with sudden suspicion that it was David's idea, not Luke's. I wondered in panic what David suspected, if indeed he suspected anything at all. Luke looked at me, his face red, his neck suffused.

'I'm all right here,' he muttered, like a small boy who suspects that the grown-ups have been talking about him before he came into the room.

'You can come back here later,' said David gently. 'It's a chance whilst I'm here to help with the journey.'

Luke looked at him with lowered brows, his mouth pulled down at the corners.

'What the hell,' he said, shrugging his shoulders, resigned, 'we might as well. Ring for some "vin", darling, I'm bone dry.'

Ah, I thought as I pressed the bell, we'll never come back. How will I ever bear imperfection again? How could I hide from Luke my changed feelings? It would have been better never to have known Paul. Like a coward I wished the afternoon unmade. Miserably I wished for my old complacency, to be still balanced on the edge. Having plunged, I was sinking. In the distance a piano was being played; there were steps on the stairs. How clearly I hear, how indistinctly I see! Because of my confusion I lingered over the evening. I thought it no longer possible to see Paul. An action, which in his presence seemed possible, became the act of a madman. I wound my knitting wool round Luke's hands; at eight-thirty I was doing my third skein.

'Isn't that enough?' said Luke. 'Considering how much knitting you do?'

At nine o'clock I became nervous. I could see Paul anxiously scanning the faces. In the end he would give up looking, determined not to mind too much. He would turn the pages of an ancient magazine or doodle on the top of the marble-topped table. He might even write a song for us, a song for our very own. Something nostalgic and sad, fitting the mood of the moment. Would he at nine-thirty go back to his cool and silent flat? Perhaps he would go down to the quay-side and watch the boats bobbing gently like corks, hear the laughter from the cafés behind, and wait until the stars grew as hard as diamonds in the velvet of the sky and the horizon a strong black line drawn as clearly as 'finis' at the end of a book. There against the darkening I might still find him.

'Wake up, darling,' said Luke's voice. 'You are in check!'

I looked at the chess-board. It did not make sense. I looked at the clock.

'I think I'll go for a walk,' I said, rising. 'It'll clear my head.'

'You're very restless to-night,' said Luke. 'All right, but don't be long.'

I picked up my scarf and went downstairs. There was no sign of David. I walked slowly, very controlled, knowing that Luke was watching me. Once rounding the corner I ran. My feet scarcely touched the ground and my scarf streamed out behind me. At the edge of the cafés I stopped to control my breathing, my hair brushing my cheeks. I swept it back and walked as casually as possible towards the Café Anglais. My eyes swept the whole and then went anxiously from table to table. There was no sign of Paul. Disappointment choked me. I stared and stared, as though I could conjure him out of the air. I willed his presence. I chose an empty table and wished him at it. I thought that perhaps he had gone to wash, to telephone, and watched the swing-doors as they were flung to and fro by

careless people. For one ghastly moment I thought I saw him in a dark corner accompanied by a woman: I heard the tinkle of her laugh, saw the sheen of her leg as she leant back to be kissed; then I saw the bone-like shine of a bald head and sighed with relief. He's not here, my heart kept telling me, but still I hoped. A young man, handsome, with a spotted kerchief round his neck, misunderstanding, rose and came towards me. Seeing him blindly through my concentration, the spell broken, I turned and hastened down past the cafés in the direction I had come. Paul must have returned to his flat and there I had not the courage to follow him.

Immersed in my own thoughts, passing the little restaurant where I had paused the first day, I nearly walked into two people strolling down the street. A sudden burst of laughter awoke me from my reverie: there was only one person who laughed with that explosiveness, that spontaneous gaiety—Odette Seze. She was obviously a little tight and enjoying the sensation. She swayed and jiggled like a huge impressive hour-glass before me. By the seductiveness of her voice when she spoke I knew that her companion was male, though his voice was only a murmur, and he was hidden by the black shadow thrown by the houses before the moon bathed the far side with a dead white light. Odette's arm thrown round her companion's neck disappeared into the blackness at the elbow: his was round her surprisingly small waist, below which her skirt billowed and swirled. Her splendid mane of hair rippled with moonlit highlights. Provocative, she sang snatches of French songs; her steps dragged, mine more so as I did not want to be seen; her companion hastening her, swung her with a long sweep of his arm to keep step with his stride. Sometimes she nestled close to him, only to move away again, tantalizing, teasing. When they came to the square, I saw that it was David. Past surprise, I only did not want to be seen and sat on a bench, giving them time to reach home before me. Seeing them together

exaggerated my aloneness; I felt as I used to when my mother went away: inconsolable.

Sitting bathed in cold light, I imagined Paul coming towards me. I thought for one moment that he touched my arm, but when I looked down it was a small grey cat rubbing against me, encouraged by my immobility.

Unlatching the iron gates I heard the murmur of their voices on the veranda. I had to pass them to get to the stairs. Afraid of their embarrassment I waited in the shadow of the tree. It was foolish: it would have been better to have called out to them quite naturally. Once they began to speak so that I could hear I remained transfixed.

'David, *mon choux*,' I heard Odette say. 'Come with your Odette, *mon vieux*.'

I heard David chuckle, but not his reply. Then I heard a sharp slap, and Odette said 'Oh!' surprisingly clearly, as though she could not believe what had just happened to her. Then, collecting herself, she said, spitting the words out with a venom which was not unattractive,

'I'll kill you!' Thinking that at last I must show myself, I drew nearer until they were in sight. David was leaning against the pillar of the veranda, cool, amused. Odette was facing him, on her toes like a matador, and with one hand she was rubbing her smacked buttock.

'David,' she cooed, her mood changing, 'be sweet to Odette.'

Scarcely moving David took her by one arm and, swinging her a little off her feet until she was beside him, he kissed her for so long that when she expelled her breath it came with a long sighing gust. I too felt breathless.

'There,' said David, picking his pipe off a table and moving away.

'There!' cried Odette, amazed. 'After that! There!'

'Si, my little Odette,' said David, teasingly chucking her under the chin and making as if to pass her.

For one moment she held his sleeve. They seemed to look straight into each other's eyes, and then Odette with

a sigh to rend David's very heart-strings, let him go and, turning very slowly on her heel, she murmured as though she had just seen something very clearly written in the air,

'I know now, I know. It is the little one.'

David turned again quickly and faced her, his face out of sight. I imagined his eyebrows raised in question. As though still thinking aloud Odette said,

'It is the little one you love! The little Madame Harding!'

'You are mad, woman.' David sounded angry.

'No, no, I'm not mad. I see it all. The unhappy little one, you love her. It is natural. One day she leave her husband that is no husband to her, and then, *voilà*, you sit in.'

'Step in,' corrected David coldly.

'Step, sit, lie, it all mean the same thing.' She waved her hands excitedly in the air. 'Every day, every day I ask myself what will become of those two if he is not better. What a life between them, eh? The little one should still be at school, and Monsieur should send her away, poof! like that and never see her again.' She shook her fists towards the window where Luke and I were supposed to be sleeping.

'I know. But he may get well again. In every way, I mean,' said David sombrely. 'If not, it's a fearful outlook. I have never known a man change so much. He was always gay before, laughing. It's extraordinary how some characters cannot stand up to misfortune. He'll become so morose. I believe he thinks that Sorel is such a child she's bound to be happy enough, and by the time she thinks of becoming restive, he'll be cured.'

'Do you think she's happy, David?'

David spread out his hands eloquently.

'Who am I,' he said so softly that I had to strain my ears to hear, 'to read a young girl's heart?'

'Something will hurt her. She has it in her face. Then, she is so innocent, so vulnerable. Come David, kiss me good-night. I must console myself with my parrot.'

Very kindly he kissed her, suddenly sober, their friendship untouched, and then she passed within a few feet of me to her room, where the parrot raised a great clamour of welcome and vitriol. David, passing in front of me up the stairs too, was unaware of my presence: only Luke, malevolent and watchful, lifted his head from his pillow as I crept in at the door, never wavering until I slipped between the sheets out of sight.

'Sorel, are you awake?'

'Yes, darling.'

'Are you glad that we are going home to-day?'

'I'm longing to see the family. But I hate leaving all this loveliness. Still, if it does you good . . .'

'We'll come back as soon as we've seen the specialist.'

'Oh, I do hope so, I do hope we do.'

'Sorel, you do love me, don't you?'

'Hmmm.'

'Sorel, you look so sad. Whatever is the matter?'

'Luke . . .'

'Sorel, come here. Whatever is the matter?'

'Nothing.'

'Of course it's something. Is it me? Look here, darling, you mustn't worry. I know this isn't much of a honeymoon but already I'm so very much better. See, I can walk a bit now. Just think of the time I couldn't move. I'm not much of a husband to you yet, but that will come. Darling, don't be so unhappy.'

'I'm so sorry, Luke, so very sorry.'

'Sorel, you do love me, don't you?'

'I don't know, Luke.'

'You don't know?'

'Luke darling, I don't want to lie about this. I don't know if I love you. I did, but now I'm so muddled.'

'You'd know if you did. Sorel, I've been thinking. Is it David?'

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'Oh, no, no. You must never think that . . . It's not being sure, and I'm so terribly unhappy about you, Luke.'

'Don't ever leave me, Sorel. I would never blame you, but I couldn't live without you.'

'Are you really, really coming?'

Paul was on his hands and knees tying up parcels. I knelt beside him and put my cheek to his. He laughed and kissed my nose. Leaning back, he took a bottle of wine off the table and, opening it, he filled two glasses. He raised his glass to his lips and I leant towards him; filling his mouth he put his lips to mine and let the liquid trickle, still cold, into mine. Sometimes I swallowed the bitter stuff, but more often I passed some back to him, until it was warm with our saliva. We did the same with the sandwiches, feeding each other like birds, solemnly and with great concentration. When at the Café Anglais, people watched us indulgently. 'Lovers,' they would murmur, moisture creeping into their eyes.

'To us,' Paul would say as he sipped.

'To you, O my darling,' I would say, feeling the bitterness of first love. I felt like a nerve laid open by the surgeon's knife: never had life had such purpose, such meaning. Never before had the sunsets been so brilliant as the ones I watched with Paul, the purple so rich, the violet so violet, the crimson so myriad in hues. Everything was beautiful, everything important.

'What a lovely chair!' I would cry, swinging a black bow-legged atrocity and sitting on it.

'What a beautiful day!' Paul would say to yet another day of scalding sun.

'What a darling café!' I would say, looking round the shoddy Café Anglais. 'What other pink should walls be?' I would say blissfully of the house on the corner: it was the pink of Margate rock.

'Such charming, charming people,' said Paul, smiling at the world in general.

'All carpets should be faded like tobacco smoke.'

'All pianos should have a faulty middle C.'

'All ash-trays should overflow with pink and white stubs.'

'No plumbing should ever work.'

'No day should ever end.'

Bitterness came when I was away from him. I would tell Luke, I kept promising myself, after he had seen the specialist. It would be too cruel to tell him now: it might leave him without the will to live. So I excused myself day by day.

'We're going back to London with David,' I had told Paul. I looked at him with tears swimming in my eyes. He didn't answer me but began to move the music off the top of the piano.

'What are you doing, darling?'

'Packing.'

'Why, darling? Why packing?'

'Going to London.'

'Paul, you're not . . . ?'

He shook a kiss at me out of his lips, his arms full of papers.

'My green goose,' he said, 'do you think I'd let you go alone?'

I sat on the edge of a chair, like a small girl at a birthday treat.

'You crazy, crazy darling,' was all I could say.

'Besides,' said Paul, busying round the room, his movements sure and deft, 'I've a whole heap of things to do in London. The Russian play is finished and I want to get a cast together.'

In a very small voice I said, 'Oh, Paul!'

'Why, "Oh, Paul"?''

'Nothing. Only I hoped it was me.'

'You conceited green goose.'

Moving along the platform with Luke and David I saw him leaning out of the window. I recognized his particularly noxious green homburg long before I saw his face. No one else had on anything quite so revolting, and yet I cherished it at that moment, forgetting the number of times I had tried to drown or burn it. I knew that he was watching to see where we climbed into the train. Settling myself into a corridor seat I cleaned a space on the window with my gloves. It was already steamed by the breathing of other passengers. In the tiny cleared space I saw my own eyes reflected, and then the cloths of passing coats and trousers, grey and mingled; sometimes the light dress of a woman. I thought Paul would be in corduroy but I wasn't sure and watched anxiously.

At dinner he sat at the table behind. Luke and David had their backs to him, but he and I were face to face. I felt confused and guilty, but he was obviously enjoying the situation: his eyes kept peering at me over his newspaper, wicked and full of mischief. My conversation floundered and I tried desperately hard to pick up the threads, to listen to what David and Luke were saying. Seeing their surprised faces, I realized I wasn't doing very well and drew my fingers across my forehead. 'I'm tired,' I said and kept my eyes on my plate. Paul rustled his paper but I remained as immovable as stone. He left his table before us, and, on our way down the corridor, there he was leaning against the window and looking - . He let Luke and David pass and then turned so that our bodies brushed as I passed. My expression was not nonchalant as I would have had it, but terribly anxious, and I watched the other two as though my eyes were glued to their backs. 'Please darling,' I beseeched in a breath as I felt his hand tug my coat. He blew tobacco smoke beyond me as though to blot me out from view, and held fast with his finger tips. For one moment we stood locked, and as the other two turned into their carriage his lips touched mine and he let me go. He simply did not accept my fear, and my nervousness began to change to elation and excitement. I wished

now that we might never stop, but stay for ever suspended between two worlds, going somewhere, going nowhere, triumphing over time itself. There was magic in the rolling of the train, the endless stuffy corridors, the dim glow of the electric light. Other people came and went, jostled, made themselves felt but remained for ever outside the perimeter of our own making.

Later, on my way to the toilet, I found him there still. I talked stiffly to him, my lips scarcely moving, looking beyond him as though by not gazing at him he became invisible and safe.

'Do you love me, Sorel?'

'Yes, darling, but let's not talk. It's nice just to be near each other.'

'I think trains are terribly exciting, now more than ever.'

'I feel like some character in *Outward Bound*, always afraid that you won't follow me to eternity. That you will be a coward and hold back. Are you a coward, Paul?'

'I'd drink the last dregs with you, Sorel, if that's what you mean.'

'Yes, I think that's what I mean. I'll see you on my way back, dear heart. Don't lean too far out of the window whilst I'm gone. We'd have gone miles before I could join you!'

In England the summer was already on the wane: cardigans were pulled round chill bodies, legs unstockinged looked defenceless and blue, like plucked fowls. As we grovelled our way over flat country the trees bent flat under a wind laden with promised frost. In the train heat rose up round our ankles, but my brown hands lying folded on my lap had an alien look; soon they would be yellow with the leaves, and then white with the snow.

'I hate the end of summer,' I thought. 'It's frowsy and overblown, like some vulgar over-dressed woman.' But most I hated the end of the journey, the end of suspension.

My father stood separated from Mrs. Harding on the platform, his expression disdainful, enfolded in his own dignity, waiting for his own kin, no one else. Mrs. Harding

folded Luke to her; she enveloped him in her grey furs, bending him under her large hat, encircling him in her arms. Briefly my father kissed me on my cheek: over his shoulder I lifted my hand to Paul as he hurried down the platform, through the barrier and out of sight. David, shaking hands all round, drew me on one side, his face solemn.

'You know where to find me, Sorel, if you need me. I'm always there to help.'

I felt a premonition; something pricked my subconscious.

'Will you come back to France with us if we go?'

'That depends, little one, on how my articles sell.'

'Faces in the South.' I laughed.

'Faces in the Sun,' he said, 'headed by our Sun goddess.'

'I shan't forget, David. I may need you at any time.'

'Look after yourself, and that husband of yours.'

At Brown's, where our rooms were booked, Mrs. Harding chatted brightly. She was like a woman who was determined to keep up a cheerful appearance however low in the depths her company. She would not indulge in gloom, not she! My father, with something on his mind, glowered, whilst Luke became oppressed by London and the consultation booked for the morrow. As for myself, I thought of Paul, wrapping myself round with impenetrable love.

'I hope Odette looked after my bairns,' prattled Mrs. Harding, unaware surely of the indifference of the nervousness in the room. She poured out the tea unconsciously, perfectly at ease. 'I've travelled little and hate foreign ways, but somehow Odette makes me feel so at home. She understands about making tea, and doesn't smother the bed with *duvets*, horrid unhealthy things. And then I can never understand that passion for sun-bathing. Not that you don't look very well, Luke darling, but when you get as brown as Sorel one is inclined to look burnt-out. Sorel, you are not eating anything. Have a Chelsea bun, darling? No? Then what about a little fancy cake? Somehow I agree with you! The food is only an

excuse to drink lots and lots of tea. I can never think why Odette never married, it seems unnatural in a French woman, as though she had parents who didn't provide for her properly. Long ago when she was young she fell in love with an Englishman . . .'

Walking in the park with my father, the reticence of childhood came like a barrier between us. He wanted to know, but did not know how to ask. I wished to unburden myself but did not know how to tell. The wind lifted women's skirts, disarranged their hats. I chased mine over the wet soggy grass and stuck it fiercely into place with my hat-pin. More than once my father cleared his throat as though to say something of moment, but ended in beating the grass verge savagely with his stick. Lovers passed us locked together, a tangle of limbs of sensational bliss. I searched their faces for that hidden look, but it remained shut within them, brought out only for their private moments. I felt like an eavesdropper and looked elsewhere. My father looked at nothing; he was like a man collecting himself for a high jump, or a runner at the beginning of a race: everything was wiped out, effaced, except the goal in sight, the leap to be taken. Frustrated we returned to the hotel, neither the one nor the other able to break the spell.

'I'd like to go down with you to see Mummie,' I said timidly, the sense of failure strong in me.

'I'd prefer it if Luke didn't come with you,' he said, holding the door back for me. 'I don't want her to know what serious consequences the accident had.'

'You haven't told her?' I said bleakly. It made it seem more important now that it had been kept from my mother. I had been looking forward to her sympathy, the cosiness of our long talks together. There would be no false barriers between us. Now indeed I felt alone. 'Mrs. Harding will

want Luke to herself,' I said quite truthfully. 'I'll ask her to look after him for a while.'

Walking up to my room I felt melancholy. Luke was in his mother's room; I could hear their voices next door, broken now and again by a splutter of laughter, and then a hum of intensity. I sat on my bed and, taking out a little creased note, a note written by Paul, I studied it carefully, as though I might see him between the lines. I ached and yearned for him. The failure with my father widened the gulf between Paul and myself. At this moment I did not know what he was doing. I went to the window and lifted the yellow curtain. A taxi stopped below, the meter clinked upwards, and a girl stepped out, her evening dress puffing out round her, the breeze lifting the ends of her gauze scarf and floating it across her bright reddened mouth. Behind her a man in evening dress, his hands already in his pockets searching their stretched depths for change, said something which made her laugh. Her laughter came muffled by gauze and leaded pane to me and as they turned into the hotel a flower from the bouquet she carried loosed all its petals, which she carelessly flicked from her arm on to the pavement. High above my head scudded clouds were darkening; the sky, lighter behind them, grew visibly brighter as the twilight threw its mantle to earth. It comforted me a little to think that that same cloud, that same patch of sky, also sheltered Paul, and with that small crumb of comfort I had to be content.

'You're a very young lady!' was the specialist's first comment when he saw me after he had seen Luke and after he had ushered Mrs. Harding, pink-eyed, into the room where I was waiting.

I smiled faintly: I made a mental note that in the future I would do my long hair up into a bun. I could no longer rely on the comfort of hiding behind my youthfulness. Something very adult had been laid upon me and I must

look the part. The specialist added to my responsibility. He told me that Luke might never be quite cured, and that only with love and patience could he be helped, and that, as far-as it went, rested in my hands.

'Nice capable hands too,' he said. 'Come and see me if you're worried about anything, Mrs. Harding.' He ushered me out: his pity might have been professional: I felt that as soon as I left he became at once pre-occupied with his next case, that poor little Mrs. Harding at once faded into the recesses of his mind, to be docketed and put away, only to be brought out again should a similar case crop up. At that moment, vulnerable as I suddenly realized I was, afraid to face the future, I felt willing to cling to even this professional promise of support.

Luke's eyes questioned me as I came into the waiting-room. Mrs. Harding was looking out of the window. They appeared to have nothing further to say to each other, as though the game of make-believe was played out. Luke's shoulders slumped pathetically. I suddenly felt proud and strong, determined to help him, to support him in his troubles, to be better. I did not realize that unselfishness, the whole-hearted giving up, came from years of discipline; that there was no compromise. Only half an hour later my good resolutions were wavering, when we found ourselves at my suggestion at the Savoy for lunch, thinking that it might cheer Luke up, and there on my way to the Ladies' Room, I saw, tempting as strawberries to a child, a long brightly-painted row of telephone booths. 'I must speak to him,' I thought, 'just to hear his voice once.' Dawdling over my hair I drove Mrs. Harding ahead of me with impatience. She tutted at me, looking at my face reflected in the mirror. We had hardly spoken to each other since leaving the doctor, but her eyes challenged me, cold blue and penetrating. Turning away, her fur over her arm, she shook it a little. 'The time you young girls take to titivate!' she said coolly, seeing no response in my eyes. 'I'll go and have a martini with Luke. When you've arranged each hair to your liking, come and join

us.' Her sarcasm was lost on me and before her back disappeared round the corner I was in the telephone booth, dialling the number Paul had given me. I clung to the mouth-piece and all my breath seemed to leave my body before his voice came to me over the wires. My legs were swimming as though liquid from the knees and my hands steaming with warmth the vulcanite handle. There was his voice, far away, impersonal. .

'Bless Paul.' My voice sounded strange to me.

'Sorel,' he said softly as though he were not alone. 'Sorel, how I've missed you!'

After that nothing meant anything to me but his voice and the hard black round hole into which I was speaking. Let the other two sip their martinis and, having finished them, let them order another. Paul was my whole life. Luke was my shadow. I poured out my heart with my voice. A small worm tried to bite into my conscience: for one illuminating moment I knew what I was doing, but with his voice in my ear I smothered this thin, niggling, insidious worm. If I never have any more happiness in my whole life, let me keep this one precious moment. If we had to be parted for one day then that day should be spent in collecting fruit for our store of love; or so it seemed.

'I must go,' I said at last, seeing the watch on my wrist, and then very gently, very softly, before he could stop me, I put down the receiver, heard his voice say something I could no longer distinguish, and then 'click' and silence.

'What excuse?' I thought to myself, making my way towards the Grill Room. I had been talking to Paul for half an hour. I had been sick? That seemed improbable: I looked too well. I had telephoned my father? They knew that he had left for Dorset. I had been talking to someone I knew? 'Who?' they would ask. 'No one you know,' I would say airily. 'Someone that I was at school with.' I suddenly felt miserable. How much easier to say, 'I have been speaking to Paul, I love him with all my heart.'

On the edge of the room I paused, uncertain of myself. Far away against the opposite wall I saw Luke and Mrs. Harding. She was leaning forward talking to him, or, so it looked from where I stood, pecking at him, and he, too weary now to listen, was resting his head against the wall, eyes half closed, as though he knew that in peering he would see nothing, that he knew now that I would not come. All around me people were moving across the floor to their tables. Girls with lips like flags, challenging, sure. Elderly men, holding blue-veined hands out in greeting. Large, well-dressed women in flowered silks with big floppy hats, meeting perhaps old flames, stirring up old memories. Waiters suave, unsmiling, swam from table to table with silver dishes. One came towards me, obsequious, servile. I smiled. I was all right, I said, and he left me, disappearing at once, shrouded with indifference. I looked for the quickest way across the room. How to get through the tables without bumping? If I went by the ornamental pillars, I would be hidden behind them until the moment I reached the table. How soon begin smiling? Half way across? By the time I reached the table my face would be set hard and stiff like a cold soufflé. Should I let expressions flit across my face, like a film running backwards? Better to wait, tense and concentrated, until I could put my hands on the back of my chair and say, 'There! I've arrived.'

Someone pressed into my back, an anxious face over my shoulder, the eyes darting hither and thither, unaware of their toes against my heels, their hat brim which threatened my eyesight. I went forward and threaded my tortuous course, taking cover now behind a waiter, now behind a pillar, putting off as long as possible the moment when they must see me, when a question would form on their lips. Luke, lifting his head, saw me, and relief streamed into his face. Silently he handed me a martini, the lemon falling gently, spirally, to the bottom as though it too had only awaited my arrival.

'You did take a long time,' commented Mrs. Harding.

'I'm sorry,' I said penitently.

'She looks lovely. It's worth all the trouble,' said Luke.

'Thank you, darling,' I said gratefully, his kindness adding to my sense of guilt.

'The doctor thinks Luke should soon be able to rejoin his regiment,' said Mrs. Harding, perusing the menu, holding it tightly as though some inner emotion troubled her.

'How splendid!' I said, taking it gently from her. 'You're having lunch with us to-day.' I felt the need to assert myself, to appear grown-up. 'Where will we be stationed?'

'I'm not sure,' said Luke. 'I'll go to the War Office to-morrow.'

'And St. Tropez?' I asked.

'We'll fix to go there until we're bored with it.' Leaning forward he squeezed my hand.

Luke busy with the War Office, I lunched with Paul. The utter bliss to be alone with him again, the happiness to sit and talk to him of all the things we mutually loved! Strangely, Paul was distraught, his eyes looking at me, looked beyond me.

'What time do you have to be back?' he asked, looking at his watch.

'I've got two hours,' I said, dawdling, pushing my food on one side and gazing at him. Everything I did with him seemed hallowed; I could feel the tension of my love beating in my throat. Paul smiled at me and pushed my plate nearer to me.

'Eat up,' he said absently. Then, stretching out his arm, he looked at his watch again.

'Clock watcher,' I teased. 'There's heaps of time.'

'Do you want any more?' he asked, looking at my piled plate. Love took away my appetite; I tasted nothing that passed my lips. It was an excuse, the outward sign of being civilized.

'Why no, darling, but you've eaten nothing yourself.'
'Never mind.' He signalled for the bill and got up.
Surprised I rose and put my coat round my shoulders.

'Where are we going?' I asked. I couldn't believe that he was leaving me before my time was up.

'You'll see,' he said, mysteriously. He seemed strangely excited and pent-up.

He took my arm and led me through a maze of streets. Each street looked like a less washed replica of the one we had been in before. Soot seemed settled with a warm tenacious softness, blurring the outlines of the buildings and silencing all sound with the deadness of snow. Occasionally a whitened doorstep startled the neighbourhood, or a pot of flowers lay disconsolate on its side, disgorging earth and faded greenery. Milk bottles, smeared, forgotten, stood beside cavernous doors. The dreariness sharpened my senses, as though there were nothing beautiful to distract me. I looked at Paul, his arm through mine, but he said nothing, only half smiled to himself. 'Where are we going, Paul?' I said again, but he only shook his head.

In front of a large building, with a board swinging to and fro over the door, we stopped.

'We're going in here,' he said, and opened the door.

Hesitating, I followed him in. In the hall there was a reception desk, but no one behind it. Paul went and, looking at the numbers on little discs above them, chose one of the keys which hung there.

'What are you doing?' My voice sounded strained, unnatural. What I suspected seemed too awful to be true.

'Come, darling,' he said and began to go upstairs.

I followed him up, my arms stiff at my sides. I wanted to be sure about something, but I felt cold with anticipation. Fitting the key into a lock, Paul led me into a room. There was a wash-hand-stand, a bed and very little other furniture. Behind the door hung a dark coat and on the window-sill was a pair of hair brushes.

'Whose room is this?' I asked in a muffled voice.

'A friend lent it to me,' said Paul, taking off his coat slowly and looking at me.

I felt the hot blood flowing into my throat and cheeks. I stood there crying, 'No, no, no,' the palms of my hands wet with sweat, my scalp pricking with anger. That Paul, my Paul, should be so importunate, so insensitive, so stupid. Surprised at my reaction, he came towards me holding out his arms, but uttering an inaudible 'No' I turned and blindly fumbling for the latch let myself out of the room and ran down the corridor and from there down the stairs into the drab and dreary street.

'Happy?'

'Terribly. Paul, did you really play here as a little boy?'

'Yes, every summer I came here with my mother.'

'Were you a very dear little boy?'

'An angel.'

'Paul, may I have a photograph of you as a dear little boy?'

'You may have all my photographs, darling, if you want them.'

'Have you ever been here since?'

'No.'

'Never with anyone else?'

'Never.'

'I wish life could be like this for ever. Just you and I, Paul, and no shame or hurting.'

'Where are you supposed to be this week?'

'With Cynthia.'

'Does she know?'

'Yes, but I hate it, Paul. It's terrible not to be trusted, or to be trusted wrongly. Cynthia loves it, though; she revels in intrigue.'

'I hate it for you, my heart's darling. I hate to cheapen you, and yet I have done things to hurt the very deeps of you.'

There was that time you took me to that awful hotel. We've never spoken of it, Paul, but I felt ghastly, that that was as high as you rated me, and no higher. For days after that I went about crushed and mortified, wishing I had left you on the beach after we found each other again: a lovely memory, a might-have-been, nothing else. When you wrote to me I was at the end of my tether, and every written word of yours was like balm to my heart.'

'Have there been other times which we've never spoken about?'

'There was the time we ran slap into your wife, going into that restaurant. I only had a fleeting glance of her before you whirled me out of the swing doors. I just had time to hear you say "Hello, darling," to see you take her arm, before I found myself out on the pavement alone. I felt dazed like an animal taken suddenly out of a cage. I wanted to walk back very bravely and say, "But, Paul, you were giving me lunch!" What made it worse was the fact that I liked what I saw of your wife. I'd never thought of her much, thinking as I did that you both went your own ways. Did she ever treat you very badly, Paul?'

'Out of loneliness, yes.'

'Why was she lonely, Paul?'

'I told you, my darling. We were not enough for each other.'

'I could never stop loving you, Paul. Even if you failed me in some way, I'd never stop loving you, any more than I could stop breathing. I think I do see your faults, such as they are, but they only endear you the more.'

'I wish we could be together always, Sorel.'

'Don't, darling.'

'Why?'

'It hurts so terribly when you say that. We can never be together always. I have Luke.'

'You owe him nothing.'

'I know it must seem silly to you, but I owe him everything. Without him I would never have met you, never

have been at Molyneux, never at St. Tropez. What future would he have if I left him?’

‘His career.’

‘It’s not the same thing, darling. When I met you again at St. Tropez I was terribly, terribly lonely, with a kind of smothering blankness. Nothing mattered very much. There was no one to understand my particular problem, only the people who would tell me to do my duty, to stick to my guns. You have to be strong to overcome that futility alone, and I was very weak and very bewildered. When you came to me I found myself strong and life worth living. I could never leave Luke to the desolation of that loneliness; I am the safety-valve essential to his living.’

‘He has his mother.’

‘The tigress! Yes, you would think she’d be enough, but one outgrows mother-love and Luke is rapidly doing so.’

‘You should be free, Sorci.’

‘Let’s not talk about it. Let’s not spoil this.’

The sea was like a pale water-colour, washed with yellow ochre, the smear of sea-weed, burnt sienna, dune grass exhausted like straw in the sun, the smooth breasts of sand-dunes, between which we were picnicking. Sometimes we moved away to pick bunches of sea-thistles and sea-pinks, with careful sensitive fingers.

Later we would take high tea: there were other guests staying in our pub but they left us alone; our love shut them out. Once we went to the village dance. We laughed excitedly, the smell of crushed grass mingling with the scent of hot sweating bodies, the beer spilled on the white tablecloths. We ate sausage rolls which tasted like sawdust, surrounding a soft core of meat. In the interval Paul played the piano surrounded by thumping hands, and glasses of beer which tinkled and slopped on the black veneer of the piano. We were very happy. To cool ourselves we went on bicycles to the shore, the air draughting my long legs, the dust blowing in moonlit sprays from our spinning wheels. The sea at low tide was a disturbance on

the horizon; only the breeze carried the salt of its breath. Awed as always by beauty I held Paul's arm for assurance. He would turn me towards him until I could only see myself a white figure, lit by green light reflected in the pools of his eyes.

'Let's not spoil this,' he would say.

Luke was stationed in Surrey and when, in the winter, his full physical strength returned to him just as the specialist had said it might, we moved into a small red-brick house on the outskirts of Guildford. It was typical of all suburban houses, one cornice misplaced to identify it from the rest: I neither liked nor disliked it. It was a home, and the only piece of it which interested me was the telephone in the hall, where in moments of sweet torture I would listen to Paul. Sometimes, like a bird in flight, I would hover in the passage as Luke, detained for some reason, would pick up the receiver, and say 'Hello,' only to be answered by 'click' in his ear, which made him look accusingly at the receiver in his hand, as though it had inadvertently put out its tongue. 'This infernal machine,' he would say, slamming it down angrily. All day my ears would listen for the bell, which when it rang would lick my ears like some infernal tongue, burning the tender membrane, stirring my nerves to unexpected frenzy. The hour in which Paul might phone past, my relief would be immense, followed by overwhelming reaction of disappointment and frustration. At last I asked him to phone no more; the strain was telling on my temper.

During this period Luke was building up the defences between us. He was ticking off the months of married life from the calendar of his mind: each day brought him more sense of security. I think he thought that each month, each day, made me older, wiser, a more dependable prop against his inadequacy. It was a puerile hope. Each time I laughed, appeared happy, I could almost hear his

platitudinous thoughts, bemusing him into false hope. 'Ah,' he would think, 'she is laughing, she must be happy with me.'

Hurrying home from excursions to London where, more often than not, I would have spent the day with Paul, I would glance at the drawing-room window, there to see the tell-tale mistiness, a haze of blotches, smoky against the chrysalis frosted ferns on the pane. It was the smoke of Luke's anxious breath, as with burning eyes he would watch the short drive up which I must appear, a dark shadow against the rutted whiteness of the snow. Only the new-formed furrows on his brow, the lines between his eyes, told of what it cost him to let me out of his sight. Day by day I tried to gather the courage to tell of Paul, but it was like telling a child that he was adopted, to break the news suddenly that he did not belong at all, except in the reading of a form, that he had been chosen out of the ranks of many other children. Not of one's blood, not of one's kin. Paul convinced me that I was robbing Luke of nothing.

'You married in a panic, too soon, and then this happened to cap it,' he used to say.

'It was partly my mother. I always wanted to help her, not to worry her; to give her any form of happiness whatever the cost to myself. I know now how wrong it was, especially to Luke. I married because I thought it was the only way to go on the stage and I thought I loved him enough. If I had met you even a day or two earlier none of this would have been necessary.'

'You could still go on the stage if you wanted to. I'd help you.'

'You'll never understand what I feel about Luke.'

'I do understand, darling, but I think you are wrong, that's all.'

Once more home by the fire with Luke I would draw out the evening. Kneeling on the hearthrug I would poke up the coals until the flames leapt and danced, licking our faces with strange fantastic shapes. Looking into the deep

rûst-gold, the blue sulphurous caverns, I would prattle endlessly, until Luke, buried in the cushiness of an arm-chair, stirred his legs, re-crossed them restlessly, and yawned huge yawns, a sign that he was ready to go to bed, that I should ask him if he were tired. Instead I said, clinging to a last straw,

'Have a drink, darling?' my own body bending under its own weight with weariness.

Sometimes reading to him, another ruse, I would look up cautiously and, seeing that he slept, I would rise, backing to the door, my voice droning on monotonously, until I slipped out, and by the time he awoke and bestirred himself I would be sleeping softly in my bed.

David came and stayed. Under his searching eyes Luke became more demonstrative, I gayer, filling the room with my chatter, my mouth a mockery, my face a mask.

'You must get a popsey,' said Luke to him one day, his arm round my shoulders.

'A popsey?' asked David, his eyebrows flying. 'No, no, I'm ever faithful to my Odette. The only woman I know who can cook.'

When he drove away, his car sending out a soft yellow curtain of melting snow and slush, I felt lonely. He had filled the days and I had found his presence comforting, a barrier between myself and my thoughts.

'Come again,' said Luke at the gate.

'I will,' said David, winking at us both.

'Now your mother,' I sighed. 'She's coming to-morrow, darling. I'd better go and tidy the spare room.'

'Don't fuss. She's not nearly so particular as you think she is.'

'I believe she goes round every room with a magnet to see if any pins have been dropped. And I never know what to give her to eat. Good plain fare, she says, and no frills, and I can see her thinking about each dish, to count how much it cost, and whether it's within your means. Darling, I'm being beastly. I don't mean a word of it. Let's pick those Christmas roses for her room.'

Strangely enough it was to me that Mrs. Harding turned on this visit, not to Luke. They seemed to have lost confidence in each other, each clinging to me and avoiding being alone. Late in the bleak February afternoon I would watch her profile silhouetted against the window like some sad Whistler drawing, her eyes staring into the distance, to the rooks flying towards a gap in the milky-grey sky, flying as though to pass over the elms pencilled against the horizon and pausing suddenly to drop amidst much clamour on the uppermost branches, their voices like stones rolling on the sea-shore.

Bleakly she would say, 'Where's Luke?'

'Out with the dog.'

Once she turned and touched me lightly on the shoulder.

'You are a good wife to him, Sorel?'

'Why don't you take your mother on one of your walks, Luke?' I asked him once.

'She hates walking,' he said quickly.

'But, darling, she gets up early and walks before breakfast,' I protested.

'Then you must come too,' he said, and I knew that what he feared and avoided was being asked the question which lay in her eyes and on her lips, waiting to be spoken. 'Was he once more my lover, was everything between us well?' The fact that it was not I sometimes felt to be my fault. Luke was timid, physically nervous, after the accident, and I was not interested enough to encourage him, to give him the confidence he so sorely needed. When Mrs. Harding left she had had no private moment with Luke, and he in his turn seemed relieved when she departed.

My days in London with Paul were halcyon days. Halcyon but exhausting. Sometimes we would meet at the National Gallery, where he would rush me through, giving me a brief resumé on each picture until at last he

would come to one of his choice, and then a silence would fall, a pause whilst he stood in contemplation, gazing with absorption. There was one El Greco which as yet I did not understand and, coming out of a trance, he would gently shake my arm and say, 'Now take me to your favourite,' and I would lead him to the Van Eyck, which I had chosen because of the beauty of detail, and perhaps because of the green of the girl's dress. He taught me about the Impressionist school: the difference between applying paint as Van Gogh did, with palette-knife and spatula, and the licking of artists like Watteau and Courbet.

'I think I like the school of licking best,' I would say doubtfully. I still had a deal to learn.

And then he laid the seeds which were later to turn me into a gourmet. Amused he watched my face when a delicious dish of *escargots à la Bourguignonne* was put in front of me. 'Are they alive?' I asked politely. On being assured that they were not I ate them, at first with timidity, later with relish. Oysters slipped easily down my throat. I learnt to distinguish them. 'No Whitstables?' I would say coldly, looking at the green bearded Portuguese. Sometimes we ran into Paul's friends: he was made much of, welcomed by distinguished painters, actors, writers. I would stand silently by, awed by the famous names, thrilled to be there, but not ready to take my place amongst them. Once or twice Paul would freeze someone into silence, or turn me suddenly in the street because he had seen some people he did not want to meet. 'Why?' I would ask. 'They look quite nice.'

'They'll want to ask for a job,' he would reply. He was very sensitive on this subject and it made him appear hard and cruel, but, knowing him, I knew the act of refusal hurt. 'That chap was starving last month. I had to tell him that he'd never make an actor. It's so silly: his family own a castle in Scotland but he was too proud to go home. In the end I wired for his sister. She seemed to be the only

person he ever heard from. I found her letters piled on the doormat.'

'Yes,' he said of a beautiful girl we saw one day, who had eyes haunted with sadness, 'but she has T.B. She's six months to live, and rather than go home she is spending her last days with a chap who dances in the ballet. I don't think he even loves her a great deal, but is too kind to say so.'

Of another, a woman exquisitely dressed, he told me she lived with a rich man who also paid the hospital fees for her invalid husband.

Seeing this other world for the first time I wondered at my lack of courage. Why had I made such a tentative approach when other people's paths had been so much more thorny?

My greatest treat was to watch Paul rehearsing. To watch the play he had read to me on the beach of St. Tropez come to life, to watch the human puppets mouthing their words until they took life and lived. The smell of the theatre, the greasepaint, the high spirits, the friendliness, the lack of inhibition were a revelation to me. I watched Paul with renewed love and admiration, as in his concentration he forgot my very existence, until suddenly, everything going well, he would come to find me, happy, entranced, thrilled with all I saw, and lovingly he would ruffle my hair, and return to his seat, where his pipe glowed in the darkness.

We spent days in the country, soft spring days, when Paul cast a silent line into a pool and fished for hours with me beside him, idle, perfectly content. All the world was clothed in a fairy radiance, the moving stream, the pendulous willows, the flickering shadowlike trout.

'We'll be punished for this,' I said.

'What?' asked Paul, his eyes on the water.

'For squeezing so much happiness out of life. One never gets away with it, darling. I wonder what our punishment will be!'

I was not to wait long for my answer. After one such

excursion I found Luke waiting for me in the drive as though he had been marching up and down for hours wearing out the gravel in his impatience. 'O!' I thought. 'He knows where I've been.' He came towards me very tenderly and kissed me, his eyes solemn.

'Darling,' he said, 'your father wants you to go home for a few days.'

'Why, whatever for? I was going anyway next month.'

'It's your mother,' he said and stopped, watching my face.

'What's the matter, Luke? Nothing wrong? Nothing wrong with Mummie?' My voice rose, sharpened with fear.

'It may be nothing, darling, but your father wants you there. Your mother is not so well and is fretting for you. She has bad headaches all the time now.'

'But she always has headaches,' I cried, staving off my fears and wrenching the front door open, crashing it back unnecessarily against the umbrella stand. 'Always, darling. Oh, Luke, it can't be anything special! Not with Mummie.'

Going into my room, I found my suitcase on the bed.

'I didn't know what to pack,' said Luke wretchedly, picking up a pair of shoes from the floor and wrapping them in a shoe bag. 'I've looked up a train; there's one at seven. It'll get you in at a ghastly hour but I thought you would want to go now.'

'Of course,' I said, picking bottles off the dressing-table and throwing them in the case at random. 'Will you come with me?'

'I'll follow you down to-morrow. If I'm in the way I'll go to the parents.'

'You won't be in the way,' I said quickly. I needed him; I didn't know how I could go alone. I was cold with fear and worry.

At eleven o'clock that night I was at home. In the train I had sat in a corner unable to read or go for my

dinner in the restaurant car. When the collector took my ticket I wanted to ask him for assurance.

My father looked grey and drawn. He said, 'Ah, you've come. How did you get from the station?'

'I took a taxi. How is she?'

'She has been asking for you. I'll take you straight up.'

'Is it a headache, Daddie? I truly won't worry her.'

'It won't worry her,' he said for the first time in my memory.

On the landing I heard faint moaning. My father opened the door for me, but closed it again gently, staying outside. In the room a night-light was burning, casting queer shadows on the walls. In the yellow light the room seemed more full than usual of knick-knacks and gee-gaws. I saw that my mother had brought out all my cherished works of art, my first effort at petit point with its tangled flower where all the stitches had gone the wrong way, my first black and white picture, done when I was six, a polyglot of fairy folk. My kettle-holder worked in some ghastly shade of purple, the charcoal drawing I had done in Paris with such pride and sense of achievement. Recently I had told her to put them away, which she had done, packing them carefully into a drawer smelling of camphor. 'You don't understand yet, Sorel,' she had said. 'When you love someone, your children for instance, you would desecrate the walls of the house with their childhood artistry. I love looking at these things just as much as I do that little Renoir over there, or that Sèvres plate. They mean so very much more to me.'

Now she lay not looking at these things but with her eyes closed, perfectly still.

'Is that Sorel?' she said, as though repeating an oft-spoken phrase.

I went on my knees beside the bed and took one of her hands in mine.

'Mummie, what is it?'

She tried to smile, but her eyes were glazed with pain.

'Why didn't you send for me sooner?'

'It's been worse to-day, darling. It's lovely to have you here, though. Don't go yet, darling, unless you're very tired.'

'I'll sleep in here. Then if you need anything you can call me. I'll be all right on the sofa.'

'There is a night nurse, darling, but just stay until she comes.'

After that she was overwhelmed with great waves of pain. I stroked her hand, willing the pain to myself, but it was no good and at last a nurse, who had been present in the room with me for some while, came and led me out.

'I will give her an injection,' she said kindly.

'I leave you in good hands, Sorel my darling,' were my mother's last words to me. After that she lost consciousness, as though she had laid her burden aside. People came and went in the room. The doctor, nurses, my poor father, but I stayed, sometimes at the window playing with the blind-cord, watching with unseeing eyes the soft country movements. The wheelbarrow full of stones trundled across the lawn, the blackbirds bowing for worms, the stray cat stalking down the path. 'I can't bear it,' I thought to myself. 'She can't leave me now.' My need cried out and the hot scalding tears coursed down my cheeks.

'She's gone,' said the nurse in my ear. Taking my hand in hers very gently, she led me to the bed.

'I never told her,' I said, looking piteously into the nurse's face. I could not at first bring myself to look at my mother, but gazed blindly at the eiderdown which her form so slightly raised.

'No, dear,' said the nurse soothingly, 'but she knows all now.' Ah, I thought, if only I could believe that to be true. I looked at her hands. At the tinged pink cuticle, at the fingers pricked from sewing. She'll never do that again, I thought. How many things I wanted to ask her, and thinking of them I looked at her face. Serene and at peace she lay there; Only the cruel world would ask her to return. I needed her humour and her understanding.

How much peace I might have taken from her had she lived! I bent and swiftly kissed her cheek. Turning I found my father standing behind me. I laid my head on the rough tweed of his coat.

'She was very happy,' he said, as though it justified her death. He kissed her forehead and folded her hands across her breast. I picked up her sewing from the bedside table and, with one desperate look towards her, followed my father out of the room.

During the weeks that followed nothing outside my own personal sorrow touched me, wrapped as I was in the waste desert of despair. Even my father's head bent in deep thought and yearning failed to draw me out of the vastness of my egoism.

'Your poor father!' his friends would say to me, and I would spare him a thought, whilst my whole being cried, 'But I am too young to lose her. Too young . . .'

'Pull yourself together,' Luke besought me, fearing for my health. He would shake my shoulders gently, or hand me my morning coffee untouched and cold, the cream floating in globular islands on the top. But I only looked inward to my sorrow.

Paul wrote but his letters meant nothing. So much dust in my hands. He never knew her. How could he understand? The pattern of her life did not include him, so he remained isolated outside, unknown, not even a spectator.

With the spring my grief flowed at last into awareness of people around me. I saw my bereft father, my puzzled husband, the stiff looks of condolence on strange faces. I assumed an outward form of behaviour, clothing my sorrow in new raiment, feeling that I was playing a part in yet a new charade. It cheered my father and placated Luke.

'Darling, I've come to cheer you up.

I looked at Cynthia doubtfully. at her dead-white face,

her scarlet lips, at the way she looked at me through her eyelashes.

'It was very thoughtful of Luke to send for you, but can Giles spare you?'

She flicked ash on to the floor negligently and curled herself like a cat on to the sofa. She yawned against the back of her hand, her teeth tapping against her tinted nails.

'We've been married for nearly a year,' she said, as though that explained everything.

'But you loved him so much,' I said, puzzled.

'I've never gone so well out hunting as when I was hunting him. I think I loved him very much. Obviously I shall love other people, but not as I loved Giles. I think we've outgrown each other. One should try and grow into each other; some people do, and then they become terribly dull because they only see each other in the other's eyes, never realizing that they only see a reflection of themselves, not a different person at all. Naturally they don't criticize each other because most people approve of themselves. Giles and I try to be individuals and consequently see all our faults. We find it so much easier to get on with other people. I am flirtatious by nature, so am permanently being amused by someone. Even my hairdresser asked me to dine with him the other day.'

'How awful. Did you?'

'No, I went all virtuous and gave him up for a while, until my hair needed cutting again and then I had to return: very unproud, but he is such a good cutter. Giles doesn't flirt but he disapproves of young women, most of all myself. He told me that to embrace me was like kissing some expensive cosmetic.'

'I can't believe it's all come to this. You loved him when you were a child. I imagined one could never change.'

Cynthia tucked a cushion comfortably behind her back. She smiled at me through a spiral of cigarette smoke.

'I was infatuated, darling. Besides, I wanted to get

married young and I thought Giles and I might turn 'a blind eye to so much of each other's behaviour. We should have signed a contract, because I turn the blind eye,' but he watches.'

I stroked the spaniel on the hearthrug. My eyes smarted from the fire. How different were my feelings for Paul! I loved; was not infatuated. I could not imagine myself seeing other men. As though divining my thoughts, Cynthia said, 'And how's your boy friend?'

'I haven't seen him lately. I don't know whether I shall ever see him again. It hurts to love someone so much; it's not a happy thing at all; and yet when I've been with him I find that I've lived, have found the only real response to myself. One might live a lifetime and never find just that thing. We've so much in common, I don't know how I ever lived without him. He makes me feel enriched and yet at the same time sad and deceitful.'

'Why don't you marry him?'

A coal dropped from the fire and made me start. Somehow Cynthia's question pointed to a failure in myself. If it was as perfect as I said, why didn't I marry him? For a confused moment I could not remember whether Paul had ever suggested it and whether I had refused because of Luke. I liked to think of it like that.

'Perhaps we should lose something. I think it's better as it is.'

'Can you bear being parted from him? What a pity you can't marry him temporarily to get him out of your system and then return to Luke who, after all, is much more cosy in a way.'

'I should never get him out of my system. It would only get much worse.'

Cynthia swung her legs to the ground and stretched her arms above her head.

'Come and talk to me whilst I have a bath. You know, Sorel, I think you complicate things terribly.'

Back once more to our home in Surrey, to the suburbanism, to the flat wooded spaces which served only as a spooning ground to the teeming masses of London; to the rows of little expressionless houses, with their thatched roofs and chocolate-coloured beams, my oppression was such that Luke, unable to bring that happiness to my face for which he daily looked, booked us seats on the Blue Train, and took me once more to our beloved St. Tropez, where Paul, irrepressible as ever, followed us a few days later.

'I'll never be able to meet him now,' I thought but had not the courage to stop him. 'Even if he's only in the same town I'll feel his presence.'

'Sorel darling,' he said to me when I had managed to meet him, 'stop looking so distrait.'

'I'm so afraid Luke will miss me.'

'What did you say you were doing?'

'I told him that I wanted to see if some friends of David's were here in their yacht this year.'

'Why didn't he come too?'

'He was too comfortable on the beach. I waited until he was hot and sleepy.'

'Clever Sorel!'

'Not the kind of cleverness I admire. I keep standing outside myself and hating the person I see. Though I'm very fond of Cynthia I see a lot of things I don't admire in her, and yet I see myself growing like her. It's very shaming. It's so difficult to get away. Yesterday it was the shoe-mender's. The day before to book a table. And always when I get back, questions. Why have I been so long? What did I find to delay me? I can't stand it much longer.'

'These moments are worth it, darling.'

'I know, but I'm always thinking of them, planning for them, and it makes me difficult and snappy with Luke. I've been thinking . . .

'What, sweetness?'

'Would you do something for me, Paul?'

'Almost anything.'

'You wouldn't meet Luke, would you, darling? For my sake. We could be together more. Even to watch you across a table would be better than this. These moments are so snatched that we only discuss the next time, nothing else.'

'He'd guess.'

'Not Luke, darling. He never sees anything.'

'I thought he was jealous.'

'So he is, of things he can't see. Never of anything right under his nose.'

'I've never wanted to meet him. I might feel sorry for him.'

'Please, Paul.'

Airily I said to Luke,

'Darling, I've met someone called Paul Maxwell. You know, the producer. I met him when I was last here, but you were too ill then. I've asked him to have a drink with us this evening. I thought you might like him.'

'You never mentioned him. Do we have to give up our peace, darling? It's so lovely to know no one. I never have enough of you, and nothing ever convinces me that you belong to me.'

'Just for a drink, darling?'

'Very well, but no more people. I want you to myself.'

With the lengthening of the evening shadows, Paul came. Odette showed him up to the balcony where we were sipping aperitifs. I did not trust myself to go forward to greet him, which would have been natural, but remained a little behind Luke in the darkness. I could not bring myself to touch his hand or stand near him. When I smiled it was stiff and formal.

Luke stood up. He appeared posed, and his manner was forced and hearty. He motioned Paul to a chair, handed him a drink, but an awkwardness had fallen on us

all. I felt that I had made a dreadful mistake asking Paul to come; that I had exposed him unnecessarily. I sat down and Luke lit me a cigarette, leaning over the back of my chair, his hand on my shoulder. I knew he must notice the trembling of my fingers. Sitting between us the next minute, he appeared to my anxious mind large and insensitive, as though he could cut the flow of our emotional currents. The talk was desultory, laboured. We spoke of the coast, of the car we had hired, of Eze, which we had visited, of the bathing. Luke tried to find mutual friends, but, finding none, he flagged. I picked up the thread desperately. Couldn't we go fishing together one day? Or even bathing at Thaiti? 'He'll accuse me of being clever,' I thought, 'and yet I'm only making conversation.' Had Paul got a car? I saw the steel shine of a bicycle, the puff of dust as Paul scraped his feet to slow down.

No, answered Paul, he'd only a bicycle.

'Very well, we'll give you a lift one day to Thaiti for a picnic. It would be fun, wouldn't it, darling?' I turned to Luke, pleading mutely for him to make an effort.

'We might go to-morrow,' said Luke, but his face belied his words. As I thought 'I wish he would go, I can bear it no longer,' Paul rose. Luke saw him to the gate. When he returned I was pouring myself out another aperitif.

'Knocking it back,' said Luke, his voice unfriendly.

'Did you like him?' I asked. I suddenly wanted to know.

'Odd chap,' said Luke, drinking an aperitif at a gulp. 'Arty-crafty sort of cove. Not my type.' He put his hand out, square and blunt, and took mine. 'You're the only person who is my type,' he said, his brown eyes enveloping me.

'He's a change,' I said unnecessarily.

'Do we need a change?' asked Luke. 'I think not, myself.'

I rose, his hand still in mine. 'I'll have a shower,' I said wearily.

In the morning, laden with baskets covered with white

napkins, and bottles sticking precariously from them, we set out for our picnic. Paul sat in the back amongst the bathing things; in the narrow boot his knees were up to his chin. Sitting sideways he held the back of the front seat, letting his fingers slide down until they came between my spine and the hot leather. With neck poked stiffly forward I watched Luke's profile in an agony of suspense. I need not have worried, he was oblivious. In one of his noisy moods, he began to sing the moment he let the clutch in. To the tune of 'Land of Hope and Glory' his hands bounced off the black shiny heat of the steering wheel; carried away by his exuberance, his feet beating time sent us down the road in a series of fits and starts. The dust blew everywhere, settling like dandruff on to his dark hair. Occasionally he leant over the edge and spat dust out of his mouth loudly and competently. Paul and I sat silenced by our tension. It was like having a wireless on in a room where a human tragedy is being enacted.

Once I murmured, 'The tyres!' but Luke only lifted his hands further from the steering wheel and skimmed so near the siding that it took several minutes to recover from the wheel wobble. Paul laughed hugely, but I sat numbed with fright, my hands gripping the seat near my knees.

The relief of arriving was further enhanced by finding myself in the water. All my tautness, my tense jumble of thoughts relaxed with my limbs melting into one whole. Luke, a violent unrestrained swimmer, thrashed at the sea with a propeller of arms: like some huge porpoise he plunged under, hobbling up again a few yards on: then a flurry and down again. Quickly spent, he flung himself on the shore where the sea lost itself in long fingers of foam, and lay like an abandoned seal flapping his hands like fins, his eyes closed against the heat of the sun.

Paul swam straight out into the glinting, winking sea; some distance off he turned and waved a beckoning arm to me. Glancing once at the shore I swam effortlessly, smoothly, towards him, and when the distance between us was but a few yards as though by common consent we both

dived. With the force of our plunge we met almost head on under the water. I could see the luminosity of Paul's skin as I turned upwards towards the light. For one second our lips met on the turn, sucked together as though in an airlock, our feet brushing the soft substances below, the seaweed, anemones, the sifting sand, before we broke apart and floated upwards through the greenish gloom to the violence of the sunlight. Anxiously I turned towards the shore. Luke was still lying there unmoved. What had seemed to be hours of stolen magic had only taken a few minutes. I heard Paul laugh behind me and, diving under my floating form, he lifted me gently out of the water and pivoted me gaily round. I began to swim quickly for the shore and lay, at last, panting and dripping beside Luke.

'Lovely!' he said, blindly reaching for my hand.

'Lovely!' I agreed, looking towards Paul who was swimming out to sea again. 'This can't last,' I thought. 'I can't keep this up.'

Lying in the sand sunbathing Paul scribbled a note on the paper the sandwiches had been wrapped in. He wrote minutely and pushed it through the sand to me. I besought him with my eyes not to take such risks, but he was impish with mischief. How can he enjoy himself, I thought, when I'm so anxious?

'I love, worship and adore you,' he wrote. 'Why do you look so worried?'

'Please,' I whispered, my eyes on Luke's seemingly sleeping form. I remembered Luke's habit of sleeping on his arms with his eyes open. I didn't trust his deep breathing, nor his occasional snore.

Afterwards there were many picnics, many excursions together. We drove into Italy and sat sipping wine at San Remo with Paul's knee pressing into mine on one side and Luke's hand holding mine on the other. We danced at St. Raphael. Luke was facetious, high-spirited, in a holiday mood: he shuffled and jostled me round the floor. At the corners he bent his knees, knocking mine: there was no need for conversation, but sometimes he opened his

mouth and shouted meaningless sounds. I felt embarrassed for him, inhibited, a little ashamed. Dancing later with Paul in ecstatic silence, perfectly in unison; I was conscious of us making an exhibition of ourselves, of giving something away: we were too perfect together. We danced as people who belong. When the music stopped I came out of a trance. Almost wordlessly we agreed not to dance again.

When we left St. Tropez, our holiday over, Paul came with us. It was Luke who suggested that he might keep us company.

The day before leaving I saw Paul for a few moments alone. He was giving us a drink and, on some pretext, I went on ahead. I caught him in his flat just as he was leaving. He threw his half-smoked cigarette neatly into an ash-tray and caught me round the shoulders, giving the door a light kick behind me.

'Sorel!' he exclaimed. 'I thought I'd never see you alone again.' Clinging like lost souls, we wandered into the sitting-room. Eucalyptus and mimosa combined to make their own light in one corner: when I sniffed it there was a cascade of yellow on to the table.

'Nothing lasts,' I murmured sadly, drawing a line through it with my finger.

'Ominous?' said Paul, kneeling on the sofa and looking into my face.

'Paul,' I said, staring at the sheen on the table, 'I can't go on.'

He dropped his hands to his sides as though they were heavy. His expression hardened, pulling down the corners of his mouth, shuttering his eyes. His head drooped until he got up and went over to the window, putting his hands in his pockets. He didn't speak. I could hear the small Dresden clock ticking the seconds away.

Waiting, I at last went to him and put my arms through his arms, round his waist, my head on his shoulder blades.

'You must understand, darling. It's Luke. I can't go

on deceiving him; it's destroying something in me. It's destroying us.'

He never moved, something approachable became unapproachable. It was a stranger's face I tried to look into. Time against me, I was frantic to make him understand.

'Don't shut me out, my darling. Try to understand.'

He squared his shoulders, loosening my arms; then he turned swiftly and buried his face in my hands. I could feel tears between my fingers. Flinging his head back, he looked into my face at last.

'I can't live without you,' he said. Gently I led him to the sofa and sat down.

'It'll not be living, without you,' I said. 'Every hour of the day will hold its own emptiness; your face will mock me in others. And yet this too is not living, this hiding, this deceit. We're not free to love, my darling. We never were. I come to you always ashamed, I cannot free myself even when I am happiest with you. I'm afraid of the spoiling. I'm not strong enough to go on. Living with Luke I shall want you all the time, Paul, but even that is easier than this.'

'And if we could marry?'

'Ah, that would be different. But how can we leave the people who love us most?'

'Luke could and should be left, as for Sarah . . . Sorel, would you do something that would irrevocably make up my mind?'

'I'd do anything to help you, Paul.'

'Will you have our baby?'

The room, all the dear familiar objects, became blotted out in the instant that he said those words. As though a hand in my breast took hold of my heart and squeezed it dry of all feeling, so I was numbed. I was suddenly afraid of this love, and yet afraid to let it go. I might look back and regret it, remembering what might have been—that it might become unendurable to live without him. I could not bear that he should think me a coward, to be so much

less than he thought me. The numbness, the hesitation, passed and then there was only Paul, most beloved of men, on the brink, the very edge of happiness, waiting for me to hold out my hand and to help him over. I did not see as he must have seen a child binding us intangibly together. In fact I did not see the child at all.

Unaware of what I was promising, I took him in my arms and said, 'Yes, Paul, I will, if that's what you want.'

Laughing joyously he said, 'And will you teach him the names of flowers?'

'I'll teach both of you.'

After that I was perfectly calm, as though nothing could ruffle the pool of my contentment. I had seen harbour and was sailing straight for it after a stormy passage. I had only now to give Paul proof of my love. He had asked for a sign and who was I to deny it him? Like the blind, I neither looked to the left nor to the right, but straight ahead, seeing nothing but only feeling the love, like the warmth of the sun, the natural source of delight. I had no other life but the life Paul offered to me, no other object but to do as he asked. It did not enter my head that with men of Paul's calibre I should allow for poetic licence.

Later, packing, Luke said,

'You seem very gay.' He said it wistfully.

'I am, darling. Very happy.' And I went on singing softly to myself.

PART III

In the winter my father fell ill. His illness became an excuse to see Paul. My conscience placated with hours of attendance by the sick bed, I would get into my car and go for a blow. Twenty miles away we met at a farm where Paul stayed and there we ate huge cream buttered buns, scalding our throats with hot tea, stuffing our unwilling selves with rich fruit cake. 'This,' said Paul, groaning, 'is becoming the food of love.' Sometimes we walked in the woods amidst chandeliers of hoar-frosted branches; later in the year we would walk in fields minted with buttercups. My father's malady was insidious, the laying down of life. He had done what he had set out to accomplish and saw no reason to linger. The doctors said it was only a matter of will-power; they did not realize that he only willed to die. With the spring, as though it implanted a new seed of hope, he rallied and went about his house again, but calling on me for constant attention. It was a false dawn, he thought, and there were many last words he wished to say to me.

Sometimes Paul met me in London. Always the same question, always the same answer:

'Yet?'

'Not yet, darling.'

With his impatience I trusted him more, and my impatience grew to match his.

'We'll have to go away together,' he said one day. 'It's the only way to make certain.' He took my handkerchief out of my bag and rubbed a smut off my nose. Our coffee, black, sweet, grew tepid on the table.

'It's too difficult. Each day I have to tell in detail where I've been.'

'What do you invent?'

'Things like dressmakers, facials, Cynthia, picture galleries. All true except the time I spend in each. I'm not good at lying.'

'Won't he go away anywhere? No courses, schools? I thought all soldiers went on courses and spent endless time shooting at imaginary objects.'

'He's a staff officer, darling. And, besides, if he goes he takes me too. We mustn't make him seem so terrible, which he is not.'

'Can you find no excuse to be away? It's so important to us.'

'I reach my limit of deception; beyond that I cannot go.'

'You don't look well, Sorel.' David leant over the table at the 'Coq d'Or' and teased my little finger.

'I'm all right, David.'

'Dear Sorel, you're always all right. As you lie on your death-bed panting for breath, the oxygen tent to hand, you'll wave an impatient arm and your last words will be the same.'

'David, that dog of yours is half blind. Is it kind to keep it alive?'

'Don't change the subject, my pet. The dog hasn't much longer to wait, you've a lifetime. You know, Sorel, you've not looked well since last summer.'

'I'm just off colour. I get headaches. Now, please, David, don't tell me about that marvellous bone-setter round the corner, because I'm not interested. Women do get headaches you know and they mean very little.'

'A headache which lasts six months? It don't seem right to me.'

'David, the head waiter is bearing down on us with a face of wrath. I'm sure dogs are not allowed in here.'

'You bad little dog! Did he really follow me in here? He must have thought those chickens on spits were paradise.'

'When I'm with you the strain leaves me, and yet you've only to turn the corner and it returns.'

'You've so much more strain to bear than I have, darling Sorel.'

'Sometimes I feel that half my life is spent eating unnecessary meals in restaurants, my only excuse to be with you.'

Josef, bending from the waist, waited for our order. He smiled with benign tolerance, the smile reserved for lovers. Paul passed me a piece of biscuit to eat with my sherry. As yet there were few people lunching at the tables: the quietness, the dim filtered light, gave one a feeling of intimacy. There was no violence, only a grey continuity, a subdued happiness. Picking up my sherry I looked towards the door, and at that moment David came in, followed by a tall, honey-haired girl. If he were surprised to see me he did not show it, but came straight up to our table and held out his hand.

'Sorel,' he said, 'how nice!'

'David!' I exclaimed too quickly, conjuring up what he must have seen, my profile close to Paul's. 'Can I introduce Paul Maxwell? I don't think you've met.' I looked past them both at the tall beautiful girl.

Paul rose, dropping his napkin to the table. Perfectly cool, he took David's hand.

The girl said 'Dahling,' in David's ear and looked questioningly towards us. She looked like a drooping little girl who is afraid of being forgotten: she took David's arm to support herself.

'We must get a table,' said David.

'You haven't introduced me,' she said pathetically, lingering.

'Mary Longman,' said David indifferently. He did not bother to tell her our names. When he went towards a table she smiled brightly at us as though we had been let into a secret.

Leaving us, they left us estranged by events outside our volition. I floundered conversationally, keeping up an

appearance of ease, my ears becoming acutely aware of the futility of my words. Paul watched David and Mary, his face cynical: there might well have been a glass barrier between us.

'Let's pretend, Paul,' I said distractingly.

It was a game we played endlessly together. Sometimes I was a siren seducing him with languishing glances, sometimes a suburban wife, strident, sibilant, or a woman he had loved years ago. At times the playing became so realistic that, returning to Luke, I could not shake myself free of it. One morning I had awoken and gazing at Luke in astonishment had cried:

'But, Luke, where are the grey walls, the pink pillars, the magnolias, the camellias? Where've they gone?' Then, taking in Luke's astonished face, I remembered that it had been a game with Paul the day before, and, turning my head, I buried my face on the pillow to hide my tearful disappointment.

'What shall we be?' said Paul, stubbing out his cigarette, turning his eyes to me reluctantly.

'Let's pretend that you are madly in love with the girl with David, and that I am terribly jealous!'

'And the other way round? You and David?'

'No, my way is more fun.'

• 'In reality, though, my way would be more sensible. You should marry David, Sorel.'

'Please, Paul, be serious, or if not serious, play my game.'

'I am serious, my darling. It would be the best thing you could do. How can I ever help you? I never even have enough money. Only dribs and drabs as I make it. No security. I get lost for days in my work, and then how often when we meet do you have to stand me lunch? I'm useless to you, and you know it.'

I felt a cold terror. He had never spoken thus to me before. I gripped my knife and fork too tightly and pushed my goulash, brown and white and syrupy, untouched to one side of my plate. Paul was eating his in quick staccato.

mouthfuls, breaking bread impatiently with his fingers and looking around him.

'Don't tease,' I implored, unable to understand his sudden ill-humour.

Turning to me he smiled, with a smile which never reached his eyes. He drank his wine, polishing it off in one gulp, and wiping his mouth with his napkin. He fidgeted suddenly with restlessness.

'You ought to go and see *King Lear*,' he said irrelevantly, slightly patronizing.

'I should like to. Can you take me?

'You should take Luke.'

'Don't be horrid.'

'Did you know that David was coming here to-day?'

'Of course not, Paul. Why ever should I?'

'You like him, don't you, Sorel?'

'Like him? Yes, I like him very much, but that's all. Why are you being so difficult, darling?'

'It's the way he looks at you!'

'He doesn't look at me at all. At the moment he is completely bowled over by his girl friend. I've often told you what David is like.'

'You'd better marry him.'

'I think this is a very silly game.'

'He'd make a much better husband than I would.'

'Paul, you're making me cry.'

'Have a cigarette then quickly, and wipe your eyes.'

He handed me a handkerchief muffled in his hand. I bit a corner of it between my teeth. Life had become as tasteless as my goulash without its flavouring. Perhaps life with David would be a relief, I thought sadly. I could not imagine him complicating issues.

'Why do you want to hurt me?' I asked.

'You're too young and resilient to be hurt for long, Sorel. Anything that happens to you now will seem like a dream in another ten years. Look at me, Sorel, and stop sniffing.'

My tears blurred his outline. I wondered whether he

were jealous or merely splenetic. He had never been ill-humoured with me before, only gentle and kind.

Like the wind, his mood changing, he said softly, 'Forgive me.'

I blew my nose loudly, hoping that David, if he saw, would think I had a cold.

'We'll go in the park afterwards,' said Paul, 'and blow the cobwebs away.' He ordered a Grand Marnier, his good-humour returning. David, seeing that we had reached the liqueur stage, came over with Mary to our table to join us. Paul and David fell easily into conversation. Mary took out her compact and began to repair the ravages of lunch. She sat gracefully in her chair, sideways, her skirt drawn tightly across her thighs. Her immaculate hair was poked and fussed into place, her hat set a little more jauntily.

Looking at me, she appeared to take note of smudged lipstick, of an unpowdered nose. I was always too shy to make up in public.

'God, I'm tired,' she said, yawning slightly. 'On my feet all the morning, in the most frightful shoes.' She let her shoes drop off one by one under the table.

'What do you do?' I asked. I felt it was expected of me.

She told me that she was a mannequin, and mentioned a well-known dressmaker. She looked at herself in the mirror over Paul's head and threw back her shoulders slightly. Certainly her figure was superb, but her face had a pale washed-out look, as though the artist had forgotten the second coat of paint. Satisfied with herself she turned and smiled brightly towards the men.

David was saying, 'Mary and I saw *King Lear* last night. Not as good as the last production you did. Disappointing on the whole.'

'What a way to talk to the producer!' I exclaimed.

'Ah,' said Mary, leaning forward and steadying Paul's wrist with her hand as he lit her cigarette. 'That's why I know your face. The moment I saw you I knew that I

recognized you from a photograph—the *Tatler*, *Photoplay* or *Screen*, I'm not sure which. I've seen that man before, I said to myself, and I'm never wrong. You mustn't listen to David. As a journalist he is super-critical. I thought the production was great fun and the settings absolute heaven.'

'Heaven and fun for *Lear*,' said David, leaning back and watching Mary through eyes half closed.

'You've saved my face. I'd already recommended Sorel to take her husband to see it,' Paul said, shutting me out. Labelling me 'married', he made me respectable. I would rather he had made the situation clear in spite of David. I was beyond that kind of falseness.

'No,' said David, 'Luke wouldn't like it. It's too high-brow.' He said it without malice, affectionately, indulgently, as though of a child about to grow up. I saw Mary glance at me, including me in the indulgence. 'She's right,' I thought, 'to think that I'm no woman of the world.'

She turned her attention to Paul. Her cheeks were now slightly flushed, which was very becoming.

'I've always wanted to go on the stage!' she said. It was an opening gambit which usually bored Paul to death: I was surprised when he asked quite seriously,

'Straight or musical?' and looked at her with a critical eye.

'Straight,' said Mary earnestly. Stroking her fur with her chin, she looked at David coquettishly over her shoulder. 'You didn't know of my secret ambition, David.' Afraid that he might belie her. He smiled kindly,

'I'd so thought it was journalism. However, if the stage, then you've met the right person.' Encouraged, Mary leant towards Paul.

'How should I go about it?' she asked, stretching out her arm, suppliant. 'I don't know the ropes and I am so terribly in earnest.'

'I might be able to help you,' said Paul.

'This is absurd,' I thought, leaning forward to do up my shoe, to tighten the laces already tight. 'I believe I'm jealous.' Straightening, I could see Mary's knee pressing Paul's. When I looked at him he averted his eyes.

'Read this, Sorel, a screed from Odette.' In my panic I had forgotten David. I started, and took the letter from him. Staring at it upside down, I turned it slowly. I wanted to think of something to say, to break a current, but my tongue felt paralysed. Mary and Paul were laughing at something Mary had said. They were murmuring confidentially, David and I forgotten.

'Thank you,' I said, handing back Odette's letter. I had not read a word, could not have told him one phrase written in the generous scrawling writing. David folded it and put it into his note-case. Looking at his watch, he exclaimed,

'Jove! Three o'clock! I must simply fly. Sorel, I'm going towards Waterloo, can I give you a lift? Or are you staying up a little longer?'

I looked towards Paul, beseeching. I wondered whether he would remember our walk, but he was saying to Mary, 'You could come along to the theatre now if you like,' perfectly naturally, as though unaware that he was putting a knife in my heart. Rising quickly, I accepted David's lift. Paul helped me into my coat, but not by a glance or a pressure on my arm did he give anything away. Out on the grey pavement I blinked in the sun. David's car was parked on the curb. I went towards it, expecting Paul to call me back. I heard David say 'good-bye' to Mary.

'I'll give you a ring soon,' he said, as though it were unimportant whether he did or not. To Paul he said, shaking him by the hand, 'Don't take my criticism too seriously. I'm delighted to have met you.'

Sitting in the car I looked at Paul. He gave me a blind look, raising his hat. Mary had tucked her arm through his and we all shouted 'good-bye' in noisy unison.

Sliding into gear and gathering speed, David said, 'He's charming. When did you meet him?'

'Luke and I met him in St. Tropez last year. Myself first, then Luke.' I felt it important to be more or less truthful. My nails were biting into the palms of my hands. I could not remember being so hurt before.

'He's found a hard proposition in Mary,' mused David. 'She's a hard one to crack.'

'Have you been trying to crack her?' I asked lightly.

'For years,' said David, laughing, 'but she's out for big money. Perhaps a part on the stage might melt her. It's extraordinary what women value. I've always wanted to meet that chap, he's extraordinarily clever.'

I saw Paul on the Blue Train dodging up and down the corridor in David's wake and wondered whether David was being obtuse.

'I wonder you haven't seen him around London, David.' I couldn't keep the pride out of my voice. 'He translated and produced that odd Russian play *The Fungus* a year ago at the *New*.'

'Yes, I saw it. Brilliant!'

'He is,' I thought. 'He's everything I need. He's my food and drink. Without him I don't exist. Let me have that baby soon, before it's too late!'

As I climbed out of the car David took my hand to shake it, but changing his mind he held it, searching my face.

'Beware of glamour, Sorel. Be very careful.'

'You're one to talk, with your blondes,' I said, reddening.

'They've long ceased to be a danger to me,' he said. 'And a producer and a blonde are sure to extinguish each other.'

'Then we're both safe,' I said lightly, disengaging my hand.

'I hope so, my poppet. I hope so. Love to Luke.'

He left me standing on the pavement. Though the station was behind me, within a stone's throw, I felt that I had arrived at it too soon, like a man faced with death too early in life: I felt cheated and bewildered. Sometimes unsure of the days Paul spent away from me, of his secret self,

I would treasure all the more the moments I held him in my arms, holding him fiercely, crying inside with the anguish of my possession. 'Now he is mine,' I would think. 'No one can take this from me, this moment, this hour. If we die to-morrow I shall have had this.' Watching David's receding number plate, I realized that I had never imagined losing Paul so easily to someone else. If I were wise I knew that I would go home and wait patiently until he got in touch with me; knew that I would ask for no explanation, that my unconcern was my strongest card. I bought an evening paper and wandered into the station. There was no train for half an hour, so I sat on one of the numerous seats and tried to read. All I could see was my last vision of Paul through the back of David's car, turning away from me with Mary on his arm. I jumped to my feet, waking an old man beside me, who looked at me with rheumy eyes before his head fell forward again. It could do no harm to ring Paul up. After all, we loved each other. I was going to marry him, wasn't I? One day we were going to be together always, have children and build up a home together. He would understand if I rang up to say 'good-bye', a last 'good-bye' as I caught my train. I hurried into the telephone booth, uncertain of my courage; before indecision could befall me again, I dialled his flat, the flat I had never seen but which he shared spasmodically with Sarah. I could hear the phone ringing, with long leisurely buzzes. Not knowing the room, I imagined its curtained darkness, the dust on the desk, the dead flowers in the vase, the picture crooked on the wall, the untidied grate, tea-cups chipped and stained on the piano. 'Sarah is a feckless, untidy person,' Paul had once told me. So I imagined the disorder they left, hurrying out of the flat in the morning, not to market, to buy fresh flowers, floor polish, or something for supper; but to their jobs, to their snatched meals, their cups of coffee, their endless cigarettes, their animated conversations, their liaisons, their successes and disappointments; returning perhaps to the flat separately at midnight, Sarah

with fresh orchids pinned to her coat, Paul, his coat dusty with ash, his pockets bulging with manuscripts. Sarah would twitch the curtains, scoop up some petals in her hand; then quietly she would dial her latest conquest, whilst Paul, dog-tired, would be already in bed, lying on his face as though he had fallen from a great height, crumpled, uncomfortable. Certain that I had mis-dialled, I dialled again. If I let it ring, Paul might at that moment arrive and, running up the stairs two at a time, clamp it to his ear. I could imagine his succinct exclamation, as he would hear it when he fumbled with the yale lock, his eyes blanked out against the sudden darkness of the room, the chair falling over as he groped his way to the phone, the vase caught just before it toppled, and then the click as he lifted the receiver, and his voice saying 'Sorel' breathlessly in my ear. So I waited tensed against that moment which never came, sure yet uncertain, and when at last I slowly put down the receiver, hoping until the last moment before the final drop that I would hear his voice, I still listened with all ears as though his voice might reach me through some medium other than the phone.

Dizzy now with worry, I leant against the glass partition and tried to think clearly. 'The theatre! They will know where he is.' I had a vague recollection that that was where he was going to take Mary. I dialled and faintly heard someone telling me that 'Mr. Maxwell had just left, could they give him a message?' 'No,' I said, shaking my head sadly, 'no message.' There was now only one thing left for me to do, go home and wait until he rang. I caught the train as it drew out of the station. In my frenzy to be home the wheels appeared to turn like some slow-motion picture, my heart to race ahead of it.

In my state of mind, had Luke been different from the person he was, I would have thrown myself on his mercy, telling him everything, asking him to share my agony with me. Finding him in the sitting-room I was arrested on the threshold of an outburst of confidences: his whole

attitude, whether he was sitting in a chair, or pouring himself a drink, spelt complacency and stopped me. Somehow I could not penetrate something insensitive in him, could not add fuel to his sense of superiority. Where most men would have been crushed by a sense of inferiority, he remained impervious as though something his mother had taught him when young, some self-importance, buoyed him now in his hour of trouble. Luke was quite happy in the state in which God had chosen to place him. It made him fallacious, and at the same time hardened my attitude towards him. No woman could resist a proud man who weeps on her breast and seeks comfort, but it is difficult to soften towards a proud man who remains aloof, believing that his own innate qualities place him above human maladies of any kind.

Instead of confessing, I dropped my gloves and bag on the sofa and prepared myself for the mental sparring match which was sure to take place. He waved a shaker at me, clinking the ice.

'Have a drink, old thing,' he said.

I twisted my watch on my wrist; it said five-thirty.

'Isn't it a bit early to start drinking, darling?' Luke had been drinking fairly heavily lately and was rapidly putting on weight.

'Never too early. I got home sooner than usual and was bored.'

'Darling, you are bad at amusing yourself. Why didn't you go for a walk, or play squash with someone?'

'I was waiting for you. Did you have a nice day?'

He handed me a drink, tweaked my ear and looked at me with unfathomable brown eyes.

'It was a nice day,' I said slowly, looking into my glass. 'I met Paul Maxwell when I was shopping and he asked me to lunch.' Luke had paused on the way back to the table for drinks as though he were listening for my next words. 'We went to Joséf's, and whilst we were lunching who should walk in but David, with a lovely called Mary Longman, with the result that I lost Paul and David lost

Mary, who went off together after lunch, leaving David and myself high and dry.'

Somehow it lightened my burden to talk of it. It lost its tragedy, its significance. Gathering courage, I asked,

'Has anyone phoned since you've been back?'

'Not as far as I know. By the way, Sorel, I've some news for you.' He came and sat on the arm of the sofa, his arm round my shoulders. My nervousness began to flatten out and I leant back, relaxed, looking up at him.

'What news, darling?'

'I may be sent to America on a three months' course.'

'But, darling, what fun for you!' I exclaimed, already anticipating my freedom.

'I thought it would be lovely if you came too.'

His voice was enthusiastic, excited.

'Me!' I cried. I felt that this was to be an added trouble, an added confusion.

'You need a change, darling. You haven't been looking yourself lately.'

'But Luke, we couldn't possibly afford it.'

'You could stay with people over there. There would only be your fare, we could run to that.'

I got up and leant on my arms on the mantelpiece, looking into the grate.

'It might be lovely,' I murmured, 'but it does seem an awful waste of money.'

'It isn't like you to be so reluctant to go abroad.'

'It's just America. I have never wanted to go to America.'

'I thought you didn't mind where you went so long as you felt "a train or a boat moving under you",' said Luke, quoting.

'One says these things without always meaning them.'

'I wouldn't like to leave you behind,' said Luke, his voice changing, suddenly abrupt. I looked at him but his back was towards me, he was pouring himself yet another drink.

'Is anything the matter?' I asked bravely.

'The matter?' asked Luke, turning and looking at me.
'Should anything be the matter?'

I waved my hand towards the tray of drinks.

'Of course not, darling. Only you drinking so early.
It isn't like you.'

Luke tapped the fender with his toe. Far away I could hear a wireless blaring; our cat purred and arched round my legs.

'Is that Paul Maxwell any good as a producer?' he asked curtly. Going over to the sofa I picked up my knitting, bending my head intently over it, pushing the stitches along the needle as though I were counting.

'I don't know, darling. The critics like him. On the other hand, David didn't like his production of *Lear*. Paul suggested I took you to see it. Would you like to go?'

'Bore me stiff. Have you seen it?'

'You know I haven't,' I said steadily.

'I don't know!' cried Luke, kicking the fender violently.
'I don't know anything.'

I felt unsafe; thinking him an introvert, I had thought he had noticed nothing.

'Tell me more about America,' I said quickly.

David came to see us but did not mention Paul. At night in our room, Luke said, 'Funny that David has never mentioned meeting you at lunch the other day, Sorel!'

'How could he, when you talk of nothing but America?'

'It's wonderful of Mother to treat us to your fare. Have you written to her, darling?'

'Of course.'

'No objections now?'

'No, no objections.'

'Sorel?'

'Paul, I thought you were never going to get in touch with me again.'

'Silly green goose. Of course I was, but I've been very busy.'

'New play?'

'A whole heap of new plays. We are forming a company and taking them to Europe.'

'When?'

'In six weeks' time. Darling, we are going all over the place—Brussels, Paris, Prague, Amsterdam. Couldn't you make it possible to creep away for a few days and meet me somewhere? It would be so lovely and we'll be away for six months.'

'Oh Paul!'

'What is it?'

'I'm going to America for three months. Luke has been sent on a course, and his mother is paying my fare. I'll come up to London next week and tell you all about it.'

'Come on Wednesday. I have no rehearsal that day.'

'How's Mary?'

'Mary?'

'Mary Longman.'

'How should I know?'

'I thought you might.'

'Silly of silliest green geese. See you V' 'nesday, sweet. Must go now.'

'Bye, darling.'

As I put down the receiver I thought, 'He never asks about the baby now. I wonder if, when one day I spring it on him, he will feel livid, cornered.' For so long now I had imagined a joyous Paul, elated, happy, sharing my delight. Now I felt uncertain even of this.

None of this, though, was apparent as he pinned a gardenia to my coat. We sat in the park, he playing with my fingers, parting one from the other. He was in a quiet, gentle mood. 'Nothing can come between us now,' he said. 'Do you feel that, darling?'

'Paul, you know I do.'

'Through all my miseries, my doubts and fears during the last two years, I have had you to cling to, and the idea of you. It's made all the difference, darling.'

'Oh, my sweet, have I helped?' My head on his shoulder, he stroked my hair.

'Such lovely, lovely hair,' he said. 'Such a beautiful Sorel. Don't you ever let me hurt you, darling. If ever I feel that I might in any way be at all unfaithful to you, then I swear I will never see you again.'

Lulled into perfect contentment, soothed, assured, I felt as though I had recovered from a serious illness, that my life took on a new strength, a fresh greenness.

In America I became certain of the child and with it my whole attitude to Luke changed. Instead of my husband he became an interloper, an imposter. It was no longer tolerable that he should share my bed: my body was to be protected, my own private affair. Ruthlessly I would cast him off, turning my back to him, simulating sleep, or say 'Leave me alone!' sharply, unwarrantably. Our life became a muddled thing made by two strangers.

Swept up in the hospitality of the Americans, it became increasingly difficult to hide my condition. Clothes were tried on and discarded, until my wardrobe became comprised of quieter clothes, subdued in tone, subtle in cut. To Luke's questioning as to why I no longer wore the pink, the yellow cocktail dress, I would reply that I found them vulgar, harsh; that I wished to throw a contrast to the flamboyancy of our American friends. Becoming mouse-like in the extreme, I took up my role of motherhood in matronly seriousness, dancing as though leaning my chest against a balustrade, my body pressed out away from my partner, separated by inches from my waist downwards, my feet two individual marionettes, will-lessly scraping the floor. Finding *mé prim*, they tried to cosy me up,

brisking the pace, clutching my waist in hot friendly fingers. With secret pride I changed the martini for acid orange juice, surprised when it rewarded me with periods of heartburn.

'Why don't you drink any more?' asked Luke.

'I'd never stand the pace, darling,' I replied, making a new hole in my belt with a pair of nail-scissors. I wandered into the bathroom and swallowed two calcium pills, guiltily, surreptitiously. I was conscious now that when I walked I planted my feet firmly on the ground as though moving on a heaving deck. I had taken to kicking my shoes off under the table, of chafing ankles which swelled, of avoiding bumping into things. It was a relief when Luke was sent to Florida, where I could not follow him. 'I'll go back and look after Daddie,' I said thankfully. I rejected offers to visit Washington: 'You may never be so close again.' I steeled myself against Luke's plea that I should stay on until his return. I wrote to Paul:

DARLING,-—Such wonderful luck. Luke has been sent on a course (you will laugh, and say 'at last') and I return to England to visit my father, and later to see you, oh my darling, wherever you are and whatever you may be doing. Next to my heart I now carry the proof of my love. It is a burden I would not dispense with! I read your letters, close my eyes and memorize them and then destroy them in an ashtray, there being no open fireplaces. I imagine American women carry on their love affairs by cablegram—see how blasé I am becoming, mentioning 'a love affair'.

Of your tour I read with great pride, from the tears, laughter and flowers in Prague, to the restrained approval in Paris. My Paul will have his head quite turned. I hope the women are hideous, the men as handsome as yourself!

I work out that you will be in Zürich by the time I could come to you, which will be an easy enough journey for me . . .

Bidding Luke farewell I shed tears, tears of sadness for what I must do to him. He misconstrued and at the last moment tried to delay me.

'Why this sudden solicitousness for your father, darling? Surely he can wait a few weeks?'

'No,' I answered, unable to solve the riddle, afraid of his probing.

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'I've never known you so restless, Sorel. Are all young people of your generation the same?'

The scrunch of the postman's feet on the gravel drive unnerved me. Steaming the window with my breath I watched twice a day his peregrinations. His chat with the gardener, head thrown back, eyes cloudwards; the temper of the winds discussed, he would delayingly play with the dog, protectively remembering a torn serge, the dog frisking away victorious, the morsel of trouser caught beguilingly in an eye-tooth. The canine soothed, it was next the parlourmaid's turn. Opening the window I would lean out to where their laughter chased round the corner of the house. I guessed the sly nips, the sidling against the portal, the letters held between casual finger and thumb to be handed over at leisure, as hostages for pleasure given, the never-ending supply, the twice a day continuity. The last provocative giggle, the gruff masculine voice, a flutter and a door slamming, as definitely as 'time gentlemen' to be repeated. I knew the cursory glance the maid would give the letters as she stepped back into the stone-flagged darkness, looking for gossip with which to regale the kitchen. 'Another letter from America! How that Major Harding writes! Never missed a post, I'll be bound. And here's one with one of those funny-coloured stamps, on very thin paper. Now who is that from, I wonder.' And so Paul's letter would be held up to the light and turned at will whilst I waited all impatience in the hall, my eyes

on the salver where, with the maid's curiosity satiated, it would at last be placed.

'Daddie, here's your post. They look very dull, darling.'

'Everything is dull when you are old, Sorel. So you in your turn will learn. It's only when you are young that hope burns eternal.'

'But you look so young, Daddie.'

He waved an impatient hand. My compliment bored him, shed a falsity with which he could dispense. Too tired to peruse his letters, he laid them on the rug on his knees, until they slid down, later to be picked up by the self-same parlourmaid.

By the window I forced myself to read Luke's letter first. Ambling and wordy, he used notepaper as another uses drugs, to numb himself against his sense of loss. He put on paper all his doings; important to himself, he wished to convey their importance to me, to amplify them thus across the space of separation.

'How's Luke?'

'Very well.' And so I would read him excerpts, cloaking the letter in mystery, leaving words unsaid, words which could be read, left lying about for all to see, but which by not quoting I satisfied my father that there was love and passion hidden there, something secret between myself and Luke. Only at last turning to Paul's letter did I find the unreadable, the deep sincerity, words used and used again to their unquestionable conclusion. Manna-like words, with no knife-edge meaning, but only food for hearts and thoughts.

'Would you miss me very much if I went to Switzerland?'

'Bless the girl! Fidget, fidget, fidget. Whatever do you want to go there for?'

'I've been invited and I would like to ski again.'

'Ski-ing may be all right, Sorel, but what you see in that country with its mental indigestion, I can't imagine. You eat too much there, as though you had suddenly

become one huge gnawing stomach; even the mountains are like Christmas cake, iced and bedecked; the fresh air is swallowed whole, and the trains fit only for a well-equipped nursery. If you want exercise you'd do better to take the mare out instead of moping with me indoors.'

'Please, Daddie.'

'You may do as you like, naturally, Sorel. Though not of age, you're a married woman. By the way, Sorel, if that's your mother-in-law's car coming up the drive, I'm going to look at the ducks and from there I shall go to the summer-house where I shall hide myself until lunch-time. You might in all fairness to me take her to the other part of the garden. The old lady makes me feel like a subaltern again; very uncomfortable, I find it.' He rose, spilling the rug from his knees, clutching the back of his chair as the blood coursed into his feet.

'Why didn't you tell Mrs. Harding I was dead, Daddie?' Unnerved, I was afraid to meet her.

'It would be far from the truth,' said my father reprovingly. 'Besides, she would have asked to see the corpse.'

When Mrs. Harding was shown in I was sitting on the sofa, a cushion tucked into my back, my sewing held as consciously low over my stomach as I was comfortably able. I felt her eyes rake me, sweeping me from head to toe.

'Why, Sorel,' she said, 'you've put on weight.'

'Steaks,' I said. Then, as an afterthought, 'and drink.'

Fetching my coat from the hall I disappeared into its loose folds, feeling myself fade slimly.

Mrs. Harding linked her arm into mine, her knitting bag slung over her arm. I felt her wrist against my waist where once there was a curved space. At the garden door I bent too quickly to put on some goloshes standing on the door-scraper. It was drizzling thinly and the ivy leaves shone as though oiled. The rain fortified me, blurring sharp outlines, my own included.

'How's Luke?' asked Mrs. Harding comfortably.

I could no longer imagine Luke, visualize his face, nor hear his voice. I had to grope consciously to make him live.

'He's very well,' I said lamely, and brought out his letter from the pocket of my skirt. The damp smudged the ink and softened the paper. I read it aloud and Mrs. Harding read the deficiencies over my shoulder.

'And how's everything?' she asked, stopping to pick off a dead chrysanthemum between finger and thumb. Looking round she sought more on which to vent her energy.

'Fine,' I said, putting an orange bloom in my buttonhole. 'Luke is doing very well on his course and he's a great success with the Americans. They ask him to "just keep talking"'. It's his accent!'

Shocked with my frivolity, she pursed her mouth and took my arm again, putting her fingers along my arm.

'How secretive you are!' she said lightly. 'You know what I meant, Sorel, but if you don't wish to confide in me then I will probe no more.'

'If you mean that,' I said cruelly, hating to be reminded, 'I don't suppose it'll ever be all right between us.'

'Is nothing ever right?' asked Mrs. Harding, genuinely distressed.

'I'm sorry to be so abrupt. It makes me feel self-conscious. How soon in life does one stop minding, stop feeling?' My arm trembled under the pressure of hers.

'That depends on how soon you learn discipline, darling. It is only a question of disciplining yourself. If only you had had a child! Have you ever thought of adopting one?'

I started from her violently. Picking stones from the path I threw them into the shrubbery, as though at some imaginary foe.

'I could never love a child adopted,' I said, turning my face from her.

'You would, very quickly. They have a way of knitting themselves round your heart. Before you know where you are you would imagine it yours, could not visualize life

without it. You could have a good nurse; then when you are stationed abroad you could leave them with me.'

'Them?'

'The nurse and the child.'

'Oh.' I rubbed a dead rose petal thoughtfully.

'I must teach you to make pot-pourri,' said Mrs. Harding briskly and walked towards the summer-house.

At Lausanne I changed trains for Zürich. Happiness enclosed me, blossoming inside me like a flower. I felt invisible to everyone, waiting only to unfold to Paul. Opposite me sat a little man: only the fixity of his stare made me conscious of his presence. The laughter bubbling inside me must have shown in tiny visible quivers down my throat. I bent my eyes over my book, but the letters danced and jiggled in rhythm to the train. The man, exasperated by my indifference, came and sat beside me. I could feel the tweed of his coat rough against my stockinged knee as he slewed round to read my book over my shoulder. Under discreet eyelids I took stock of him: he was a bloodless little man; his hands fidgeted with the buttons of his coat, nervously twisting and turning them. Short-legged, he sat on the edge of the carriage seat as though one push and he would fall forwards to his knees, toppled like a doll. His eyes were enormous behind thick lenses, his mouth small, mean, wet, as though constantly licked. His cheeks, transparent like a child's, were covered with soft fair down; his collar flaked with dandruff.

'You English?'

'Yes.' Averting my face I looked out of the window. There was a drift of snow, cast here and there, flecked like foam on a green sea: it was too early in the year for the warm blanketing to follow.

'You act?'

'No.' Caught off my guard I asked, 'Why?'

Encouraged, he licked his lips with a small pink tongue like a dart.

'You look like an actress.' Pushing closer, his thigh warmed mine. 'You look pretty, like an actress.'

'The theatrical company at Zürich are friends of mine.' I swept them to me in one enfolding sentence. Looking at him my eyes froze, before they fell once more on the print below them. Encouraged, where no encouragement was meant, the little man felt in his hip pocket for a flask which he withdrew with some pride. Unscrewing the top he waved it in front of my face, persistently, as though testing me for blindness.

'You have a little brandy with me, eh?'

'No, thank you.'

'Perhaps you like coffee in the restaurant? See, I know what English ladies like!' Pleased with his perspicacity he hugged his sides with delight.

'No, no coffee.'

He swigged the brandy, smacking his lips, breathing its fumes on to my cheek. Emboldened by its warmth he leant his chin, small, pointed like a ferret, against my shoulder.

'Interesting book?'

Tilting it I encircled it with my hand, squeezed my leg against the side of the carriage until it tingled with pins and needles. 'Very.' Frigidly I spoke, as though to an inferior being.

'At Zürich we'll have tea.' He complacently sucked in his cheeks. A sudden anger hit me like a storm. Was I never to enjoy my happiness in peace, was I to share it with every stranger, every passer-by? At all costs I must stop this man talking before I screamed. I could feel unechoed screams taking command, soon to be out of my control. Turning on him so that my eyes blazed into his, unfocused to his nearness, I said, my voice rising to hysteria,

'I'm in love. In love, do you understand?'

Electrified into a new awareness of me, as though I had

revealed myself as a man in woman's clothing, making him appear ridiculous, admitted to some loathsome disease, or some heinous crime, he drew back, drawing his coat with him as though contaminated, and then without a word went and composed himself fussily on the seat farthest from me, twisting his shoulders to look out of the window, hunching one up as though to obscure me from view. Occasionally I caught him looking at me furtively, his fingers beating a tattoo upon his knees. When an attendant came with tea tickets he seized one gratefully and, shuffling from the carriage, left me to my peopled loneliness.

Unable to wait, I powdered my nose long before we reached Zürich, applied lipstick and then reapplied it, did my hair this way and that way, never satisfied, swaying uncertainly with the train's motion. When we arrived I was unprepared and caught unawares busied myself with trembling hands with the luggage in the rack. Paul, looking for me, saw me before I him.

I moved forward to embrace him, his hands coming out to reach me. We stopped half-way, unsure, both excited but uncertain. Before the barrier Paul placed my suitcases carefully down and turned in all seriousness to me.

· 'Sorel, I must tell you something.'

'What, darling?' Panicked, I stood waiting.

'I love you more than anything else in this world.'

'Oh Paul!' Laughing up at him I encircled his neck with my arms, and he kissed me, it was as though there were not another soul on the platform. Only as I picked up my fallen handbag I espied the little man from the train watching us with envy, hatred and malice.

In the taxi Paul asked, 'How long are you staying, darling?'

'For ever,' I replied, and really believed it.

Later, walking arm in arm round the main streets of Zürich, looking in brightly-lit shop windows like Christmas trees, Paul's hand, fingers locked with mine, in my pocket, I brought up the subject of the child.

'You're pleased, Paul?'

'Of course, darling. I hope it's a boy.' He turned to a window filled with umbrellas. The picture of a girl laughing in a downpour ran out of a picture towards us, whirling an umbrella in her hand. He looked at the window transfixed; I watched his pale reflection, the rapid glow as he sucked his pipe. Something casual in his voice made me watch him anxiously.

'I never know what you are thinking, darling,' I pleaded. I felt alone as though I had to make all the plans, initiate everything.

'Perhaps that's because I'm thinking of nothing at all. At that moment I was only thinking that I should like to buy you a red umbrella and see your hair against it.'

Mollified I squeezed his arm. **'I hope it's a boy too,'** I said, suddenly gay. **'And famous and clever like his father.'**

'And beautiful like his mother!'

There seemed to be no people in Zurich. I had no eyes for the sombre men hurrying down the street with black despatch cases clasped in their hands, leaving their offices as late as seven, eight o'clock. When we turned into a bar there were more of them soberly drinking beer, their cases leaning close at hand as though ready to be snatched at a moment's notice. We sat down unnoticed in a corner. I felt protected now, encircled, isolated, my fear leaving me. Paul ordered two beers at the counter and took my hand again as though he found it hard to relinquish.

'When will it be?' asked Paul, sipping his beer as though it were wine.

I counted on my fingers and told him, looking at him carefully.

'Where do you intend to have it?'

'I haven't thought, Paul.' The air became full of solemnity; a problem unsolved, but which I had counted on him to solve, hung like a palpable presence over me. I became again unprotected, vulnerable to the noise in the street, the alien forms around me.

'Silly green goose, you'll have to think.'

I folded my hands on the table like a child about to say grace and stared at my whitening knuckles. A dog sniffed at the legs of our table; a man swung his hand against it as he passed.

'I thought you'd know of somewhere,' I said in a very small voice. I laid my helplessness down before him and waited for him to take up the challenge. What if he did not accept it? I tried not to relate my feelings of that moment to the rest of our lives.

'I'll have to think of something,' said Paul, knocking out his pipe and putting it into his pocket. 'You should have thought ahead, Sorel, not leave everything to fate.'

I bent my head over my glass, watching the bubbles of foam bursting. My shoulders slumped, my hair fell forward on to the table, hiding my face. Muffled, I said,

'It's been so much planning just to get to you that I forgot the rest. I only wanted to be here, to see you.' I had waited so long to lay the burden on his shoulders. Now I only felt guilty at my presumptuousness. He looked worried, pale.

'We'll have to think of something,' he said. 'I've this tour and then a pretty busy London season. I'll have to think pretty hard over the next few days.' I saw myself shouldered aside by stage lights, hectic programmes. I felt frightened and desolate. I wondered when he would mention marriage. I so wanted him to that I sat and imagined it said until, the lights beginning to dim all over the town, extinguishing themselves one by one like blown-out candles, we rose to go. Engulfed later by Paul's presence in my room, by his love, I forgot that this was the man I had temporarily feared might fail me: I grasped gratefully at the smothering of all thought. When he left me we agreed that the hours would seem interminable until we would be together again.

Only in the morning waking before my breakfast had come I lay oppressed, fearing something intangible, something not within my control. Some light I had expected

to illuminate me at this moment remained obstinately dark, unlit. I had Paul and yet I felt alone. Through the thin papered wall I could hear the ball of conversation being thrown carelessly backwards and forwards by a woman's husky voice and a man's tunnelled murmur. I looked forlornly at the indentation on the pillow where a few hours ago Paul's head had lain. I hated the voices for their easy intimacy: I imagined their owners married and secure, their life no ulterior problem. 'Paul, Paul!' I cried inside the very depths of me. 'Let me be safe!' Why was I so anguished? It lay in some elusiveness of Paul's. I had told him of the child and he had said that he was pleased. I had asked for his help; he had not refused it. Last night he had held me passionately in his arms without any distinguishable change, and yet the future perturbed my mind, my heart fluttered like a caged bird.

The telephone rang in my ear, and at the same moment a tray, wafted ahead of its bearer, appeared round the door, bearing with it its own damp invigorating smell of coffee and fresh rolls.

'Sorel!'

'Darling.' Hearing his voice, relief flooded into me.

'How did my Sorel sleep?'

'Very well. And how did my Paul?' I snuggled down into my bed, laying the earpiece on the pillow, my ear against it. I smiled absentmindedly at the waiter as he put the tray on the commode at my side. I waved a frantic hand to stop him drawing aside the curtains. Globules of light were already patterning the carpet and an eddy of centrally-heated air fanned through the room from the open door. The darkness made our conversation more important, more intimate.

'Darling,' said Paul, 'your favourite Dürer is being shown in an exhibition from Munich. Would you like to see it this morning?'

'I'd love to, please, darling. Are you free all day?' The words no sooner said I wished them unsaid.

'A rehearsal this afternoon. I'll meet you in the hall in one hour. All right? 'Bye, darling.'

Seen through the banisters as I ran down the stairs, he was walking up and down all impatience, as though with determined striding he would wear a path for himself in the heavy piled carpet. When I reached the bottom step he hurried towards me, his hands outstretched, his manner urgent.

'I've been horrid!' he exclaimed, clasping my hands in his.

'Why, Paul?' I asked, surprised. A protest was already on the tip of my tongue: too willing to forgive, I did not want him to condemn himself further.

'Yes, horrid, darling,' he went on. 'There's my beloved having a baby, my clever, clever Sorel, and I've hardly bothered to say how pleased I am. Early this morning I woke up full of remorse and wrote you this.' He handed me a long sheet of paper. 'It's a prayer for our child.'

He took my arm and led me to two deep armchairs. I smoothed the paper out on my knee, and read:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

My children which are on earth,
Hallowed be your names,
For giving me my daily bread
Of sacrificial flames.

Hallowed be your names, my dears,
Who strive eternally,
Reprieving breath from Beauty drowned
In my catastrophe.

It is not worship. Nature brings
In bird, or tree or beast
The glories of their being are
But ashes at my feast.

The sun's unthinking morning hymn
The Himalayas lit—
He praised my hills, but never knew
My tortured people's pit.

But you, my children, ah! my dears,
What worship do you bring,
Who know my wars, my hates, my fears,
And still my Beauty sing.

Forgive me then my trespasses,
And lead me from my sin;
Yours is the power to make me good;
World without end. Amen.

'When I'm afraid I shall read this. I'll cherish it
always.'

'Why should you be afraid?'

'Afraid of being alone.' Then very quietly, half to
myself, 'Like Sarah.'

'How absurd you are! I came here full of love. Don't
make me angry. You've nothing in common with Sarah,
why mention her now and spoil everything?' Then,
getting up, he said with a glimmer of humour, 'Come on,
the two of you.'

Seeing my picture of grasses I was surprised by its
smallness. From prints I had seen I had imagined it
larger, had lain in my imagination amongst the dandelions
foot high, had smelt the sweetness of the grass closing over
my head. I wondered if everything in life was doomed to
be a disappointment, to be so much less so than I imagined
it.

'Don't you like it?' asked Paul, seeing my fallen face.

'Yes,' I said doubtfully, and moved on to a Rembrandt
saddened by my disillusionment.

'Happy?' Paul asked later at lunch.

'Terribly,' I said, and it was a half-truth. I was worried
dreadfully by the fact that in three days Paul's company

were to move on to Berlin. As yet he had not suggested that I should go with him.

'What will Berlin be like?' I asked hopefully.

'Receptive, I think. More so than this. Take care of yourself whilst I'm away, darling.'

Stunned, I played with spilled salt on the clean tablecloth. I drew crosses in it with my little finger and then dusted it into an ashtray.

'I thought . . .' I began.

'What?' he encouraged. I seized my wine glass, my hand shaking. I spilled some wine on my grey dress, where it fanned out in an increasing purple stain as though absorbed by blotting paper.

'Careless Sorel,' said Paul sharply. He mopped at my skirt with his handkerchief, but it made no difference to the sloe-like mark, and he looked round for some water in which to dip his handkerchief.

'I'm sorry to be so clumsy,' I faltered, and then said, surprisingly, as though missing a cue, 'I thought we were going to be married!' Tears began to cascade down my cheeks soundlessly: they surprised me by their suddenness. Paul with his same handkerchief began to wipe my face with frantic dabs.

'Of course we'll get married,' he said, like one soothing an infant, his voice shrill with his anxiety to make me stop. 'But be reasonable, darling. How can we get married now whilst we're both married? We must get divorced first, then we will get married.' I looked at him, astonished that he had not thought of this sooner. I took his handkerchief from him and, thoughtless for my appearance, dried my face.

'What am I to do?' I said, hating myself for my weakness in asking him. 'Where am I to go to, Paul?'

'You must go home and wait for me, darling. Wait until this tour is over.'

'Home? But, I can't possibly. The baby is beginning to be quite obvious now, how can I go home to Luke and live with him again?'

'I didn't say go back to Luke. By home I meant England. I'll give you an address in London where you can stay until my return. There's a nice old woman there who will look after you. She's an old friend and will take care of you. I've written to her already, so you can go straight there. Now, darling, stop rubbing your face away and stop being so miserable. It's spoiling our time together and, besides, it's bad for the baby.'

I felt that he had parcelled me up very neatly, tied the string and sealing-waxed the knots. Now he had only to post me and I would be out of the way.' I tried not to show this on my face. I tried desperately hard to make the next day or two ones to be cherished and remembered. When he said 'good-bye' to me on the platform with tears in his eyes, I tried only to think of his return within three months, and not the frightening monotony of ninety days without him. Without him at my side I found writing to Luke difficult. I could no longer put off telling him the truth. To the throbbing of the channel boat I sat in a deckchair with my pen held in blue, chilled fingers, the wind flapping my coat against my legs and lifting the note-paper when my stiffened fingers relaxed their vigil. In these unpromising surroundings, purple with cold, I tried to put on paper my feelings for Paul. The words came at last as grey and dismal as the sea we ploughed through the sky which lowered overhead. With the sun of France, of St. Tropez, they might have been convincing, more coloured, more eloquent. On the train to London I tore them up and decided to go to Surrey to await Luke's return, to tell him with my own lips.

For a week I waited, telling no one that I was back, and the phone, when it rang, I left unanswered. My loneliness my only companion, I walked the countryside. The very paths became an echo of my mood: drear and drab they ceased to hold a difference; the trees, once loved, now shut me in with claustrophobic sureness. Even the sky was jaundiced with saffron-yellow clouds, the glimpses of blue so pale and watery they might well have been reflections

from my swimming eyes. Knotted inside and weighed down with sadness, I wrote to Paul but never posted it. Letters from Luke, forwarded by my father, with whom he imagined I was still staying, came filled with ephemeral love and happiness. Naïve in their enthusiasm, they added to my torture. If Paul wrote his letters would be at Warwick Road, at the address he had given me. For a few days I thought that I could do without his letters, but, a week over, the suspense became unbearable, and early one morning I caught the train for London.

In a row of sad Victorian dwellings, I found the house I wanted. Such character as it had was pale fawn coloured. A house without expression. No brass to shine, but painted door-knobs, and chocolate-coloured window-frames. Each house in the road looked squeezed between two others, as though the architect had intended spaciousness, with large windows, big doors, but the need for dwellings being such he had economized, and halved each house unmercifully. Timidly I rang the bell which hung large and forbidding, once brass but now unpolished and tarnished over, outside the door. I could hear it ringing hollowly in the basement. I wondered desperately why Paul had sent me to such a grim, forbidding place, and then the door was flung open and I thought I knew, for there was Mrs. Jenkins, the woman whom Paul had said would look after me so well.

Mrs. Jenkins was a massive woman, her mountains of flesh poured unmercifully out of a corset which, possibly because of its age, neither controlled nor disguised the rotundities. Her hands, surprisingly small and white, were mere playthings at the ends of huge sausage-like arms; her feet also small, unable to support her weight, turned over cruelly, so that she used the sides of her shoes, not the soles. Her face, broad as it was long, was red, and covered with a soft brown down. Her eyes, peering over her cheeks, beamed and twinkled like small soaked currants set in a doughy pudding. Her mouth, generous and smiling, drew back over magnificent teeth, quite her best

feature. Her hair, black and sparse, was tidied into a large coarse net. She wore a black cardigan, now shapeless with pulling and tugging; it looked as though the knitter had cast on and off the stitches at random.

'You'll be little Mrs. Harding,' she boomed down at me, and taking my arm she led me into the house as though from now on I was to be her especial charge. As the door closed behind me, I felt dwindled, without a thought or a will of my own.

In the dark hallway, littered with mackintoshes, their smell mingling with that of fish from the basement, she switched on a yellow light and took a good look at me as though assessing my condition, my state of health; and as though she found neither good she swooped on to my suitcase which I still held in my hand, and with much wheezing and blowing began to carry it upstairs, where I followed her, feeling not unlike a new girl at school.

'This time I may only leave my suitcase,' I said. I did not feel ready to be enclosed by this atmosphere. Already I saw myself catching an evening train back to Surrey.

'Just as you like, dear,' said Mrs. Jenkins kindly. 'I can have you any time. Mr. Maxwell told me all about you. I'd do anything for Mr. Maxwell, I would.'

'Why?' I wanted to ask. 'What is it that makes us all do anything for Mr. Maxwell?' I hoped that Mr. Maxwell had not told her *all* about me.

Showing me into a small bedroom, she dumped my suitcase, with much show of breathlessness, on the bed.

'You'd like a nice cup of tea, I dare say,' she said.

'That's very kind.' Unable to wait another moment in suspense, I asked quickly, 'Are there any letters for me?'

'Yes, dear, there are downstairs. If you'd like to go along the passage, I'll show you the way. I'll go and fetch them and the tea at the same time.'

'No, thank you, I'll come with you.'

Downstairs she showed me into a room dusty with disuse and furnished with antimacassars and potted ferns. I sat on the edge of a faded green velvet-covered chair and

screwed up a white antimacassar in my impatience. I could hear the stairs creaking under the room as Mrs. Jenkins descended to the basement. I longed to go and help her, to find my letters for myself. It seemed hours before she returned, bearing a tray on which the only important things for me were the two stiff white envelopes.

'Here we are, dear. I'll pour it out for you, shall I? You must be parched. I like tea myself in the morning, though from midday onwards beer is my drink. You can't beat beer, I always say, it does something for you. Windy, though, I find it at times. Inclined to blow you out. Still, that's healthy. Nothing like senna pods too, for that matter; never have a hang-over if you have senna at night. You should take senna, dear, you'd get a nice colour like what I've got. They call me Rosey down at the local, though my real name is Maud, but they must have their little joke. I'll take you with me one day, we have jolly evenings. There's a man what plays the piano, and I sing. Should have had my voice trained if I had had my way. Ever such a good voice I had, but I met Mr. Jenkins and married when I was seventeen, so I got trained in other ways. Still, you can't have everything, and now Mr. Jenkins is dead and some people think my voice is too!' She screwed her neck round to be able to read my letters more comfortably over my shoulder.

'Nice hand Mr. Maxwell writes, I must say. Quite a literary gent. Well, dear, I'll just go on with my dusting if you don't mind. I was in the middle of it when you arrived. I must feed my kittens too. Six nice ones I've got, though you'd think they were fathered by every cat in the street, such colours they are.'

One letter from Zürich was full of reminiscences, of our happiness, of our love. One from Berlin was hurriedly written between rehearsals. It told me little news, only that he loved me. It was all I needed to know. I felt now that I could wait a little longer in Surrey for Luke. Making my excuses to Mrs. Jenkins, leaving my suitcase as a sign of good faith, I caught the train back to Guildford.

Before I opened our front door I knew that Luke was back. In the garage I saw his wooden army trunk, the untidiness of ropes and cords thrown carelessly on the concrete floor like disorderly snakes. Caught unawares I was thrown into a flutter. 'I must tell him now,' I thought wearily. 'Why didn't I hear this morning that he was coming?'

Pushing open the front door I saw his letters lying open, their jagged edges showing with what impatience he had opened them and thrown them back on to the silver salver with disinterest. The hall was stacked with luggage, half open, trunks and suitcases spilling out odds and ends of shirts and other garments. I called 'Luke!' several times but only emptiness beat back to welcome me. I went into the drawing-room thinking to find him asleep there. The first thing to meet my eye was a smeared glass and an unstoppered bottle of gin standing on the table; a lemon squeezed like a clown's mouth lay beside it. I sighed involuntarily. I turned to the fireplace and half-way across the room stopped. My desk, usually shut and neat, was standing open, gaping at me as though with guilty surprise. The papers were pulled out of the pigeon-holes and were lying in a confused heap like a ready bonfire. Now and then the draught from the door lifted one lightly and precisely and planed it down to the floor like a poppy seed. I moved swiftly over and opened a small drawer where, thinking I was alone, I had dared to keep a few, the most loving, the most precious, of Paul's letters. They were no longer there. Frantically I scabbled through the papers lying outside. I went to other drawers, spilling papers everywhere in my haste. Bills, receipts, other private letters, lay there, but nothing of Paul's. My hands were clammy, my forehead damp with anxiety. Paul had forbidden me to keep anything, even the shortest note, but, partly in my faith in Luke's code of behaviour, in my unadmitted admiration of his standards, I had kept these lost few as a comfort and a bulwark against my loneliness. I ran into my room. There disaster followed me. My

room had been systematically ransacked. A wardrobe door stood open. A handbag, where again carelessly I had stowed a letter, was gaping open on the bed. My drawers were littered with their contents on the floor: even the carpet was turned up all round, revealing the murkiness of under-felt. Everything in the room, the bedspread, the pulled curtains, the cushions in the chairs, showed signs of being picked over in haste. I stood astounded, unable to understand this sudden lack of control. What demon mind had started this germ of destruction?

I went into the kitchen where my Swiss cook was standing at the table, her hands caked with flour.

'Anna,' I said, trying to conceal my anxiety, 'where's the master?'

'But Madame,' she exclaimed in surprise, 'he went to London to meet you. He so upset when you not here when he come. Then the telegram saying he was coming arrive after he get back so he understand. But he say he must find you. I say you come back for dinner, but he go just the same. Then I remember you carry a suitcase when you leave so I wonder whether I'm wrong and Madame not come back to-night. Now,' she added with pride, 'I make master's favourite *Apfelstrudel*.' She slammed a length of floury pastry on to the table.

Bewildered, I stood at the door. What had made Luke go off at a tangent? Anna, looking at me, came and put her arm round my shoulders, keeping her whitened hand carefully away from my dress.

'Madame, what is it? You look ill. Lie on your bed and I make a cup of tea, eh?' How many more times was I to be offered tea for my sick heart! I nodded and went towards my room. Passing Luke's dressing-room, I went in. There on the dressing-table I found Paul's letters. Slumping on the edge of the bed I read them all. I had forgotten how clear they made it that I intended to have his child. Gathering them up I put them on the drawing-room fire, poking them gently until the last word, the last syllable, was blackened and charred. Then very

methodically I began to clear up the room, to tidy the disorder. When Anna came in with my tea I was sitting at my desk writing to Luke, explaining something he already knew. Whichever way I worded it, it still sounded untrue when I said that I had had every intention of telling him for myself.

'Anna,' I said carefully, 'when the master gets back I want you to give him this. I've to go up to London again.'

'But you'll see him?' asked Anna hopefully.

'I'm not sure. In case I don't, give him this.'

Anna, rubbing her hands in her apron, took the note with her finger-tips. The tragedy to her *Apfelstrudel* obviously began to weigh on her mind. Who would now eat it in this mad house?

'Good morning dear, a letter for you again. What a faithful one that Mr. Maxwell is, I must say. Have you been retching again, dear? You do look pale, I must say. I thought I heard you in the night but then it might have been that lady in number nine. She's a baggage and no mistake. I hear the boards creaking at night and she thinks she is as light as a feather, or I'm potty and don't see what goes on under my very nose. "Mr. F. e" she calls him at breakfast when it's been "Bert" all night. Ever so refined she looks when she asks him to pass the butter. There, dear, there's an egg for you this morning. I wouldn't let you have breakfast downstairs with those nasty common people. They're just not your type no-ways. Now I will leave you to your letter. Remember me to Mr. Maxwell when next you write, won't you, dear?'

For a month I crept round streets with antennae-like eyes. A hat bobbing in the crowded streets, the tweed of a coat, the way someone walked, had the power to drive me into doorways, into shops where I would buy unwanted goods. Once on the way to the bank, which I had occasionally to visit, I saw David in the distance. I longed

to go and confide in him but instead I went into a bookshop and began thoughtfully to turn over some of the books which, when I really looked, my anxiety over, turned out to be technical books on engineering. I spent long hours in cinemas welcoming the safe darkness, the sense of escapism. I wept tears with Marlene Dietrich, laughed helplessly over the antics of Laurel and Hardy. Sometimes Rose, finding me reading, in the stuffy little parlour, would drive me out, or, tucking her arm in mine, would take me to the local to meet her friends.

'Cheer you up, dear,' she would say, jabbing a hat-pin firmly into her hat on which the cherries bobbed gaily, and smearing over the glass with her breath as she leant forward to inspect herself more clearly. 'They are a bit rough at the local but you stick to me and drink lemonade and you'll be all right.' She took the stub of a cigarette off her lower lip and smoothed down her bosom. 'There,' she said complacently, 'that's the best we can do.'

At the pub it was quite obvious that Rose was all things to most men; a happy mixture of mother and paramour. Her good temper was a relief after sharp-tongued wives: she fed their vanity and encouraged their confidences. To Joe the barman she was a gilt-edged security. If she did not appear for several days his business began appreciably to fall off. 'Where's our Rose?' untidy stubbled men would ask, spinning their caps on the top of the counter, looking round anxiously for the comfortable, colourful figure. Not finding her, they would swallow their half pint hurriedly and go. Even the wives were susceptible to her charm and to her good advice. Her good sense fortified them. 'Men are children,' she would tell them comfortably. 'If a child is naughty what do you do? Deprive it of something. You must deprive that husband in just the same way, and you know what to deprive him of! You know what I mean.' And she would give her listener a playful poke in the ribs to emphasize her point. Needless to say the deprived husband would come to Rose for his solace. Her attitude to me was one of amiable

protectiveness. At the pub she would sit with her arm round my shoulders until we got up to leave. She informed everyone that I was pregnant as though in some mysterious way she had something to do with it. It was a source of enormous pride to her. Childless she watched my increasing inches with something like awe. 'Whatever would I've been like,' she would say, chuckling, looking at her bulging curves, 'if I'd been pregnant? My husband always likened me to a feather bed. I'd have been more full of feathers than ever!'

Daring one day to go into my club, I found a letter from Luke. It was short and sad. It besought me to return to him, to have the child as his. He found that he could not live without me. I had only to return to be forgiven. Moved to the depths of myself, I longed to see him to comfort him. As though to vacillate I went out into the country north of London and posted him a letter asking him to inform my father that I was held up in Zürich with 'flu. To tell him this until I knew for certain where I would be. Every few days there were letters from Paul: they were the only bright spot in my life and the only thing which kept me going. I relied on them and I relied on Rose's company, the warmth of her presence in the big, dismal house.

One afternoon, returning bemused from a cinema, I found not Rose to greet me but a note propped up on the umbrella stand. On a scrap torn in haste from the top of a newspaper I could just make out her scrawled writing written in purple, indelible pencil, much licked to add emphasis to her words.

DEAR,—An old friend who knew my late husband has just turned up. We are going for a walk and then will have one before we come home. I have put your tea ready on the tray in the kitchen, you have only to light the kettle.

ROSEY JENKINS.

It might have been my disappointment not to find Rose there, or the silence of the big house which filled me with foreboding when I looked at the mat and found a letter from Paul which had fallen through the letter box. As I picked it up I felt afraid to read it. It looked innocent enough: there was his writing on the envelope, the post-mark still Berlin. In ten days he would be with me: this letter was to tell me once more that he yearned for me as I did for him. I was foolishly oppressed by the film, which had been sad: I had wept, seeing myself as the poor heroine who had tried so hard to make the man she loved give up drugs and drink. In the end she had failed and my last sight of her was watching this worthless man, on whom she had lavished so much love and care, being taken off finally to a mental home. I would never see anything like it again. It must be bad for the baby, filling me with morbid fancies. I put the letter in my pocket and walked upstairs. In my little cell-like room I sat heavily on my bed. All my movements were laboured now as though I were carrying precious china in my hands and was afraid of stumbling. Taking Paul's letter slowly from my pocket I felt panicked. I stared at it as though I would see through it. Putting off the moment of reading, I felt a broken nail and went over to the dressing-table for a nail-file. I turned over an array of toilet requisites, my powder bowl, my hair brush, my scissors. No nail-file! I set myself a task: no nail-file, no letter. I hoped in my heart that I would never find my nail-file, and just as I had given up hope, there it was in the top drawer, lying between the lining paper and the light biscuit-coloured wood. I took it over to the bed and bent assiduously over my hand. The daylight fading, I rose and switched on the light, which threw a cold blue illumination over the bed and the blue paper of the envelope. With no further excuse, no reason now to put off the moment of opening my letter, I slit it quickly with the nail-file. I noticed at once that it was longer than usual, that it ended with just his signature 'Paul'.

DARLING SOREL,—Since I last saw you I have been thinking unceasingly about 'us'. When we said, we loved each other without reserve it was true; but, Sorel, it would be false to say that it is 'everything' now. Because I believe it would be wrong to go on not being 'everything' to each other I am writing this now, darling, to say 'good-bye'. I would give anything in the world to feel differently, and anything in the world not to hurt you of all people so dreadfully.

For a long time 'I don't know' has been written on my heart. I think it has on yours too—no, perhaps only on mine, and it's my 'I don't know' which must at times make yours, and must decide us now.

What I do know, darling, is that I gave you unutterable happiness—that's not conceit. I know I did, or how else could I have been so unutterably happy with you, through you and by you?

I know that I am hurting you through my own weakness and thoughtlessness, and that that remorse will be with me always whatever happens to either of us. I know that you would never fail me as I am failing you now.

You must go on, darling, with your life and with the life of our child. There are other things, my darling, which make life worth while, and all these 'I knows' are all in 'the pity beyond all telling': they have 'a dying fall'. I know other things too—the things that make the pity bearable and keep one wanting life. Work in trying to create something, some little truth out of one's own experience, and others which one can pass on. The companionship of beauty—Oh, a hundred hundred things, which come to surprise one in the depths of despair.

Teach our child to be as steadfast as yourself, and teach him to know the country as you yourself know and love it.

Try to forgive me, darling. That I am weak I freely admit. When I suggested our having a child I thought

I could cope. Only when I saw you in Zürich, saw you yourself half woman, half child, did I realize the responsibility I had taken upon myself. Saw too late that it was you I wanted unfettered by ties and dotted lines. Go back, darling, to life as you know it. Go back to the people who can protect you. I do not want you as part of this life. If it were not too late I would begin anew with you and the child, but it is too late. I have made my niche, though it pleases me little enough, and I cannot escape. Pity your poor, weak Paul and try to forgive. And thank you for all the wonder you have given me.

PAUL.

How long I sat holding the letter, quite numb, staring into space, I don't know. Too shocked to cry: the tears which would have comforted me never came to the surface. I was incredulous. The words I had read could not be true! Paul must be ill, the only explanation for his cruelty. Perhaps he had some incurable disease, T.B. or something, and was nobly releasing me.

My Paul would never fear the responsibility of a child. I must go to him, reassure him, comfort him. I roused myself to a frenzy of activity. Throwing a suitcase on the bed I began to fling things into it. Higgledy-piggledy, a jumble of pink and blue softnesses. I shut the lid firmly. Taking my handbag I stuffed my passport and some notes into it. Activity, the feel of my passport, the crackling notes as I put them into the leathery, powdery-smelling handbag, released my unhappiness. The mundane, the ordinary mocked at obscure tragedy. Urgently I put a beret on my head, flung a coat over my shoulders. If there was no train I would stay at Victoria. Another night here was unbearable. I must move on one step closer to Paul. On top of the dressing-table I began to write a note to Mrs. Jenkins. As I stood wrapped in thought, licking the pencil, I became conscious of my face in the mirror. I stared at it, expecting it to have changed, to have aged. I felt

cheated that it looked no different. Smooth, unlined, heart-shaped, it stared back at me: only the eyes were anxious and troubled. The same long blonde hair swung to my shoulders; the same bloomed skin which Paul had loved. Looking down at my waistline there was a difference; only my outline was blurred, indefinite, and no longer youthful. Had he failed to foresee the essential change? Could he not, like myself, for the moment wait patiently, content, contained?

I looked at my feet, well-shod in crocodile, at my slim ankles. I was almost the same, but at the same time exposed, threatened by some alien challenge. Perhaps it was some other woman Paul wished to take with him to Paris. Arriving to see him I would find him with her, see his eyes blanked against me as he'd disengage himself slowly, regretfully. And my mind would become an extinguished thing, only the agony in my eyes would be apparent as I would watch him bend over her, murmuring briefly, explaining me away. And she might laugh, shrugging her shoulders, watching with sardonic amusement as Paul unceremoniously wheeled me to some remote corner. Criminally guilty, I would stand before him swinging my suit-case, until with extreme irritability he'd take it from me, ridiculing me, making my action coming to him importunate. What further explanations did I want, to what extremes of brutality did I wish to force him? So I would stand condemned. And the woman with her experience, her wit and sophistication, would wait quite restfully for him to return. Knowing that he would. Later they could laugh, sipping their drinks, drawn together by my humiliation, by my blunder; each sure that when their time came she would make no such mistake, but gracefully withdraw, so that long afterwards meeting on a pavement by chance they would kiss gladly without rancour, old lovers becoming new friends.

Seeing this all clearly, tortured with my vision, I stopped, pricking my tongue with the pencil, which I left to

lie beside the clean sheet of paper. It was no longer possible to go; Paul would never forgive me.

Pushing my arms into my coat, I left the room quickly, leaving my handbag gaping, my suitcase shut and ready. Flicking off the light I plunged down the stairs into the pooled darkness of the hall. Now I was only afraid of Mrs. Jenkins' return, of her eyes on my face.

A soft rain sprayed my face as I turned into the road; lozenges of yellow lit the pavement from uncurtained windows. I walked at random, only hurrying as though to escape from something. Head bent against the chilling shower my mind raced over the past. Somewhere there had been danger signals which I had chosen to ignore. In so many ways Paul had warned me, and yet hopefully I had disbelieved.

Long ago he had taken me to that disreputable hotel. Would he have done that if he had really loved me? His dismissal in Zürich. It was at a time when I should have been at his side. Over the child he had shown no excitement, only a forced gaiety, to salve his conscience. How long had he wished me gone? How long ago had he marked down his new victim? Tortured I hurried on, my feet ringing the pavement hollowly, the rain settling like mist on the fabric of my coat, fringing my hair. As I passed a public house the door swung inwards, exuding light and warmth; a voice greeted a friend, a careless happy voice; then the door swung outwards, leaving only the white light behind glazed glass, and silence. A policeman walked past me. Something about my hurrying form made him stop, pause, and then swing on his heels and walk on, his thumb in his belt.

The houses leaned perspectively before me: sometimes I turned a corner, but it was a mere unconscious sway of my shoulders which carried me round. I had no object, no destination.

I crossed traffic lights and reached the busy thoroughfare of the King's Road. My feet were beginning to drag; I ricocheted gently against hurrying forms. I gazed now

into passing faces, gauging degrees of happiness, measuring them by metre and pint. A girl leaning sideways towards a man, her whole weight on his arm, her face tilted towards his, filled me with agony and longing. It was like a sword thrust in my heart. I stopped, riveted, watching them, until lost in their world they passed on, hidden by more marionette people, out of my sight.

Cafés and restaurants enticingly exhaled hot food smells. Having not eaten for some hours I felt sick. At last I left the lights and shops and entered again a quiet road of houses, with spasmodic splashes of neon signs. I pictured Paul suddenly appearing, apache-like, out of a dark entrance, and taking my arm. It was a mockery! He had only written to test me. For a little while I walked imagining the pressure of his hand on my sleeve. Then with a sigh which shuddered my body I faced the truth.

By the time I had reached the spot where the King's Road runs into the Fulham Road I was exhausted to the limits of feeling but hurried on, head down, towards Putney Bridge. Furtively I looked at the passers-by. I perceived no change in them, no miraculous revelation.

On the bridge, poorly lit by occasional lamps, I stopped and leant over the broad murky balustrade. I could smell the brown flowing river, the mixture of soot and grime. I looked down. There below me, translucent and speckled as a thrush's breast with light and shade, smoothed the Thames. The more I stared at it the further down it seemed, like a ribbon drawn tantalizingly from under a kitten's nose. I looked along the shores to the small landing stages with their jutting quays and little craft bobbing gently, the plane trees growing exhaustibly from the broad pavements, and behind them the twinkling lights of the riverside public houses.

I trailed my fingers in the filth on the balustrade and forced my eyes downwards. A log suddenly lit by a play of lights floated helplessly from under the bridge, shiny as a slug until it reached the darkness beyond. Now the darkness before my eyes became a false darkness; the

darkness of tear-blurred outlines, of hammering pulse. I was suddenly surrounded by a tense electric darkness of which I was the core, and though all was obscurity my mind was intensely active, directing my limbs so that I moved mechanically away from the bridge and towards the Fulham Road, for I knew that if I once gave in I would faint, and lie waiting until invisible hands, strangers' hands, picked me up. I hurried on to join a bus queue, overwhelmingly frightened. It was not until it was my turn to climb on to the bus that I remembered that I had no money. 'Oh!' I exclaimed. 'Oh!', and stepped back quickly into the gutter, averting my face from the conductor's. Carelessly whistling, he pressed the bell and the bus lumbered on.

With a long walk home before me, I hurried along the road. With each step I became determined not to collapse here amongst strangers. No one must touch me. I belonged now only to myself. I straightened my shoulders and lifted my chin. I longed for my bed, as towards an oasis I spurred myself on with renewed energy. A wind rising suddenly out of side roads, and from around corners, blew the rain in pin-pricks on my face, and lifted my hair coldly from my ears. My ankles though cold and damp were burning with fatigue. In a little while my child became a centre of aggravation, causing my frame to sag as though the very muscles themselves were being dragged by invisible hands. I no longer peered into faces; figures silhouetted against lit doors lost their interest for me. I saw only my front door in Warwick Road; was absorbed in my singleness of purpose.

By the time I reached my own street my feet were hardly raised from the pavement, and at the bottom of the steps to the house I clung helplessly to the railings. A cat, seeking human warmth, mewed at my feet and furrowed its slinky form round my legs. I climbed to the top step and sat down without the strength to open the door. The cat, encouraged, thrust its face into my chin, its lips folded back from its teeth with the effort of rubbing its head against

my jaw. I bent my head over my knees, my hands clasped round them, my wedding ring biting into my flesh with the frenzy of my hold. 'I must, I must,' I murmured wearily. Steps hurrying down the road forced me to rise as hastily as I could and let myself in the front door. Rose must have been in and gone out again. All was in darkness and the tinged smell of cooked cabbage was as before. Like a coward I longed for Rose's presence, the comfort of her fussing. Alone I felt exposed even to myself.

Climbing to my room, I found it untouched, the curtains still undrawn. It was lit by the faint glow which roofs all London. My suitcase still lay in a cube of shadow on the white counterpane. Automatically I closed my handbag, forcing the clasp up. Unable to find anything more to do, I sat in front of my dressing-table, where, in the still unlit room, my face was reflected like a faint oval, misted round in the mirror.

Looking from the mirror, I glanced down at my hands turned upwards on my knees, the fingers curled tightly. I noticed my wrists. Delicately pale they were, the skin unstretched and soft. I lifted one and looked at it closely. There was a strong middle tendon: it jutted up like a ridge. When I moved my fingers others moved, buried under warm flesh. Blue veins darted like tiny rivers over the surface, and bluer still was the round cushion beneath my thumb. I pulled my sleeve up to my elbow: the delicacy of flesh continued, ending in a baby crease above the joint. Ruthlessly I remembered how Paul had loved that crease, with what perverse satisfaction I sensed his lips against it. I was dizzy with remembrance, with self-inflicted torture. How I hated myself, who was no more lovely to Paul. What was lovely about me now with my gross ugly movements, my swollen feet, my peaked, anxious face? Who was I that I should be picked out, made special amongst women? So he had loved me free; with nothing to bind him to me he had loved me, but fettered he was lost—I had become a burden, an obligation. I came between him and his enjoyment, laying claim to him I had lost him, now

he only wished to be rid of me. Anything, anything to get away from me, away from my dependence, from my mute breathless love. There was nothing left now for him to love, and I had none of the wisdom, the companionability of the older woman.

'Mrs. Harding, dear?' I heard Mrs. Jenkins' voice floating to me up the stairs, and then a heavy foot on the bottom step. Unwilling to be seen in my mood of deep introspection I went over to the bed and lifting off the suitcase pulled back the bedclothes and struggled underneath. Still in my coat I was mountainous under the sheet. I lay suffocated on my side, my face half under the bedclothes. I had not lain guilty like this since I left school. Outside my door I heard Rose pause, listen, and then tap lightly with her fingers. 'Mrs. Harding, Mrs. Harding dear,' she whispered softly. She must have opened the door enough to see I was safely in bed, for I felt a sudden gust of air, heard a slight rustling before her steps faded away down the stairs, the boards creaking under her weight. At last sure that she would not return I crept out of bed and divested myself of my clothing.

In bed, eventually, relief came, not in sleep but in tears from an inexhaustible source. It was dawn when I at last fell into a troubled sleep, and already I could hear the 'swish, swish' of Rose's brush on the stairs.

'Why don't you have a nice lie in, dear?' asked Rose, putting my breakfast tray on to my knees. 'I shall be out shopping most of the morning. There's a fire in the parlour if you want to get up, but I shouldn't if I was you.' She stood over me, her arms akimbo, eyes bright with enquiry. Finding me pink-eyed and monosyllabic, she tucked me in gravely, her lips puckered with concern.

'It's a depressing time, I know, dear,' she said. 'One gets full of the strangest fancies and life seems hardly worth living. But joy cometh in the morning, or so they say. I'll buy you a *Weldon's* whilst I'm out. They have ever such nice cheery little stories in them, moral and all.

It will be better for you than some of those books you read. Only fit for lining drawers, I must say.'

Hearing the front door bang a little later I climbed out of bed. I felt in a state of dazed convalescence; my feet when they touched the floor scarcely felt it; everything seemed very far away and remote. I dressed in haste and without my usual care. I was sure now that I had nothing to live for; that I could not live with this pain for the rest of my life. During the night I had resolved to put an end to it all, now I had only to find the strength of mind. If I had hoped for a reprieve in the shape of a letter from Paul, there had been none. Neither had the face of things seemed any different; no miraculous change had been wrought in the night. My hands trembled with my hurry and I began to be very conscious again of myself. The slenderness and vulnerability of my neck, the way the whiteness suddenly creamed into my chin. The feel of my legs in silk stockings, the bluish whiteness of the skin where my suspender hung. The soft imperceptible down on my upper lip, the moons white and crescent of my nails. And most of all my forehead, broad and smooth with the fair hair springing from a widow's peak and framing it like a Tudor cap. I could imagine it cracked like an eggshell, the hair clotted with blood.

On legs stiff with terror, and with chattering teeth, I went across to the upstairs parlour, where in a meagre grate a fire emitted an occasional yellowy sulphurous flame. The room was bathed in a cold light which came from two tall french windows leading on to a rococo balcony. The room was stiff with discomfort: the chairs, covered with faded red plush, were on runners and tilted dangerously when sat on. The horsehair sofa pricked through the thickest clothing. The carpet was uninviting, having its own coating of a mixture of cat's fur and aged dust. It was not, however, to sit on chairs and sofas that I had come into this particular room, nor yet to pace the carpet, and I went straight to the windows and unlatching one let myself on to the balcony. Outside all was grey. The grey houses

opposite, the grey street below, under a mother-of-pearl sky. Through tears it all misted into one. It was for me a topsy-turvy world.

I stood in the small gutter running round the balcony, where leaves from the plane trees were damply rotting. The top of the balustrade was only up to my thighs; there would be no climbing, I could tilt over quite easily. It was easy and quick.

I gazed up and down the street. A figure hurried past on the opposite pavement, a woman carrying a huge shopping basket. I waited for her to disappear. In the house immediately in front of me someone was using a vacuum-cleaner; I could hear the rise and fall of sound. When the net curtains blew out, puffed by the wind, I caught glimpses of a black impersonal figure. Below in the street leaves lifted in the breeze, revolved in little eddies, whirled round, or hooped over the pavement. They made a crisp sound in the air. A front door a few yards away opened, a hand reached for silver-topped milk bottles and slammed the door loudly.

'Now,' I said to myself. 'Now!', and waited for someone to help me. But there was only myself.

'Now,' I whispered frantically, and leaned precariously over the ledge on the tips of my toes, my arms stiff at my sides. The pavement looked hard and barren; it swam dizzily and then settled itself. 'What if I land on the railings?' I asked myself, and imagined myself pathetically impaled. A leaf from a stunted plane tree spiralled softly to the ground. 'Ah,' I thought, 'I wish I were a leaf.' Further I leaned, and this time one foot left the ground. 'A shudder and I would be over. 'It's better to jump and avoid the railings,' I thought, and at that moment a taxi came cruising down the road. I drew back into the shade of the house. It passed, and after it followed some youths, shrill-voiced, dribbling a ball between their feet, passing fleetly down the street. I prayed for them to stay but their catcalls grew fainter and fainter, mocking at my futility.

When I went to the ledge again I dared not look down.

This time if the whole Salvation Army passed below I would spring into the air and fall without a cry, already half dead with pain and grief.

As I felt blindly for the ledge, as I took a deep breath to jump, the child, still until now, so that I had discounted it, not believing it lived as a separate being, chose this moment to assert itself. It had reached its ripe five months. As though it knew that any moment might find it pinioned to railings, or its mother a human coffin on the pavement below, it took its destiny into its own hands and kicked out at me with all the vigour and violence of desperation. Feeling this upheaval inside me for the first time, I opened my eyes wide in astonishment. I no longer looked outwards at the scene around me, but inwards to the young life, and at myself, the evil arbitrator of murder. Overwhelmed, puzzled, I drew back to the safety of the windows. What an extraordinary feeling! So it was alive, really alive inside me! Patiently I waited for the butterfly feeling again, to be quite sure of what I felt, nor did I have long to wait. Butterflies and bubbles! And then mercifully, because I had put off the moment of fainting for so long the vertigo swallowed me up and I fell, not to the pavement as I had planned, but to the nearness of the patterned carpet.

‘He is the most beautiful baby in the world.’ Odette tucked the slithering eiderdown more tightly into my bed. She put a cool hand on my forehead, smoothed back my hair and went back to the cot.

‘What shall we call him?’ she asked later, bringing him over to me. I looked at the little crushed medlar-like face. ‘Paul’ was on the tip of my tongue.

‘Little Willy will do for now,’ I said sleepily.

‘He is a champion baby,’ cooed Odette. ‘See, Sorel, look at his tiny feet, his little finger-nails. I could eat him.’

'Do all babies have that crushed look?' I asked doubtfully. 'I think he looks very small.'

'It is as well for you that he was small,' cried Odette indignantly. 'He's a precious bundle, my little *mignon*, my *petit* boy friend.'

So it was Odette who gave my Little Willy his first bath, who first dressed him and put him to my breast. It was Odette who surrounded us both with love, who shortened my days for me, who forced me away from my morbid brooding. She placed knitting in my hands and good food into my mouth. Only once did she question me.

'You'll be very angry, Sorel, if I ask you something.'

'Ask me and find out.'

'It is impertinent of me, but, Sorel, was it David?'

'Oh, no!' I cried, truly shocked. 'Not David.'

Odette sighed with relief. 'I would not like to think that he would let you down.'

'Did you love him very much?' I asked softly.

'Very much.'

'I'm so sorry, Odette. So very sorry.'

Odette shrugged her plump shoulders and smiled.

'It is all right, darling. We are good friends. In France we French women do not make such a fuss about love. We are more sensible, practical. If we lose our love we do not find ourselves distraught, sad. We do not spoil our nice looks for love, like you English girls. How then will we find another lover? It would be stupid, we think, to let one man spoil us when there are so many interesting ones in the world. So we battle on and soon are all smiles and softnesses again for someone else. There, there, darling, do not cry. Odette cannot bear to see you cry, little one. Soon it will heal, this big hurt of yours. You cannot believe that now, but it will. Long ago I loved an Englishman—very fine he was. That is why I speak English with scarcely an accent—and he was killed. Did I grow thin and pale? Why no, I opened this hotel and made it comfortable for English people. Each day I get a little of the happiness he gave me seeing his countrymen content. It

is the sensible way. One day you will take the same path and begin to live outside yourself.'

'Do you think I'm selfish, Odette?'

'No, darling, a mother has little time to be selfish!'

'It's all so difficult. When I was a child my mother was an invalid, our house revolved round her, my father thought of no one else, neither did I. Then I wanted to go on the stage, really wanted to, but my father only had to mention that it would kill my mother and I became secretive, underhand if you like, and, not knowing the terrible thing I was doing, I married Luke, because he promised I should go on the stage. I didn't consider what the consequences might be for Luke, or how disastrous it was to marry someone I was not wholly in love with. Indeed I knew nothing of love. I think my mother was quite content. If I did nothing else, I kept my unhappiness from her. I realise now though that it was very wrong and that the only thing that matters in life is to keep one's integrity. When my child grows up I shall try to understand him, to help him in whatever he chooses to do. Whatever it may be I shall never feel ashamed of him, because I will remember.'

'You may be tried very hard, Sorel.'

'I would only be tried if he did something he couldn't not tell me about. Then I should feel I'd failed.'

'You are already on the path to recovery, darling.' Odette bent impulsively and kissed me. I smiled wanly.

'If that is really so, Odette, it's because of you. When I was at my most unhappy you seemed the only real person to come to.'

'That is because of my good French logic, darling. At a time like this the English are either shocked or sentimental. They make no allowance, no deviations from their code of behaviour.'

Little Willy was as like me as a baby can be like anyone. Sometimes I would see Odette looking at him intently, looking for some clue as to his real identity, but my little blond boy with his nondescript blue eyes was just a

smudged nonentity, growing more like his mother and less like his father every day.

— When he was about two months old I awoke one morning to an atmosphere of secrecy and excitement. I felt it when the maid, instead of Odette, brought my breakfast tray in. It was so unlike Odette to miss seeing Little Willy that I asked where she was.

‘Madame is picking flowers in the garden,’ the girl informed me. And indeed at that moment I could hear her, hear the snip of her scissors, smell the bitter scent of cut stems. I imagined her shaking the dew off each flower in little showers: it was still early and Odette herself had informed me that she never picked flowers for the house until ten o’clock. Her voice, loud, animated, shouted orders to her staff. The parrot added to the bedlam with his screech, and hurried feet ran backwards and forwards across the courtyard. I climbed out of bed and took Little Willy from his cot. He waved tiny fists at me and gave me a crooked smile.

‘No Odette for you this morning, my boy,’ I said, changing him. I fed him near the balcony where I could watch the scene of activity below. Odette, espying me, looked shocked.

‘Take Little Willy in, Sorel. It’s too cold for him.’ I went in obediently and shut the window. I sat peacefully on the bed. Feeding my baby brought me a new serenity: I felt that at last I could do some good for someone, however small. Later when I was holding him over my shoulder for wind, Odette burst into my room like a thunderbolt. When she had shut the door she controlled herself with difficulty, assuming an air of uneasy nonchalance. I could tell by the careful way she shut the door that she was near to explosion. She stroked Little Willy’s cheek and was rewarded by his sharp expulsion of air. ‘Clever,’ she murmured.

I looked at her quizzically, but she avoided my eyes and went over to my wardrobe, flinging it open.

‘What will you wear to-day?’

'I've nothing to wear, darling, except my grey wool.'

Odette pushed my dresses along on their hangers and inspected each garment minutely. At last she pulled out a blue angora, very pretty, but still too tight for me.

'I should wear this,' she said, shaking it out.

'It's my best, and, besides, it's too tight.'

'I can let it out for you now. Slip it on, darling.'

I looked at her suspiciously and put Little Willy back into his cot. 'Why all this fuss?'

'No fuss,' said Odette, 'I want you to look nice.' And she went to fetch her sewing things.

She came back with her mouth full of pins, so that further questioning was useless. She revolved round me on her knees and when she was satisfied she whipped the dress over my head and took it away to sew. I waited patiently in my dressing-gown until she should bring it back. I was beginning to feel mystified and a little uneasy. Had Odette betrayed me in some way? I could not believe it, and yet . . . When she had dressed me to her liking she said that she had a surprise for me.

'Don't go out, darling,' she begged me. 'Wait for me for about half an hour.'

'I wish I knew what this was all about,' I said, frowning.

'You will.' She laughed mischievously and kissed her fingertips to me. I yawned and went and sat on the balcony. Little Willy was hitting his rattle which hung from the top of his cot. He did it quite unconsciously but it brought him great pleasure. I propped my book on my knees and picked up my knitting. It was a white matinée coat, but already looking half worn, with grey beginnings. I thought I would soon learn to smock: it would somehow have more body to it, and my knitting always shrank after the first wash and had to be discarded. Soon it dropped on the floor and I lay, my head back, my finger in my book to mark my place, and began to concentrate on the small sounds around me. Little Willy was bubbling. Little blue bubbles burst on his lips; they joined the dribble on the side of his mouth and disappeared into the pillow. One

leg of the cot squeaked every time he moved. When it stopped I knew he slept. I imagined oiling the leg and at the same time losing my signal of peace. Down the road someone was scything. I could hear the long caressing strokes very distantly. The smell of the cut grass was more definite. From the kitchen came the murmur of voices, more, I thought, than usual, and more lively. The breeze lifted the cord of my blind and knocked it against the wall with a tap, tap. I could have prevented it by tying it up, but each separate sound soothed me and made me somnolent. When someone knocked on my door I was half asleep and felt dazed. When I saw David standing there it seemed like a continuation of a dream, and I scowled at him, trying to remember.

'Why!' said David, coming and kissing my forehead. 'You don't look pleased to see me. Not even politely so.'

I looked past him at Odette.

'Why didn't you tell me?' My voice was an accusation.

'It was to have been a lovely surprise,' said Odette doubtfully. She had expected me to be pleased, she was suffused with pleasure herself.

'I will go and get you some tea,' said Odette, her eyes on David. When she went out, he went and bent over Little Willy's cot. I was crimson with embarrassment; it made me defiant. I went and stood beside him by the cot. 'Well?' I said ungraciously.

'He's very attractive.' He looked at me thoughtfully. 'You could have told me, you know, Sorel.'

'Why should I burden you with my troubles?' I felt strung up against him, as though I was the victim of some plot.

'Perhaps you didn't want to hurt anyone. Consequently, we have all been hurt.'

'No, not all,' I said sadly and thought of Paul.

'Sorel, will you assume that I know everything? Shall we call everything by its proper name? What I have to say may hurt you and when I have said it you may never want to see me again.'

'Why are you doing this, David?'

'Because I'm devoted to you, Sorel, and because I know a little of your difficulties. At one time I had hoped it might be me you would love. No, don't protest, Sorel. It's true, but I renounced you not out of any noble motive but because I felt quite sure that if you did leave Luke you'd regret it all your life. You're not the kind of person who deserts a sinking ship, and your sense of loss and failure would grow with you with the years. I had not the courage to risk your ultimate happiness, nor your puzzlement when faced by two loyalties. I did see you drifting into difficulties but I couldn't stop you. If I'd told you that you were infatuated it would only have served to make you angry. Then, forbidden fruit is always sweetest. Perhaps I hoped that it would bring you some kind of peace: having tasted it and rejected it, you would return to Luke more happily. I counted of course without Little Willy. I did not know just what kind of a person we were dealing with.'

'How long have you known?'

'When one loves, is fond of someone, one knows instinctively when something happens to them.'

'It's no good, David. If he came in now I'd follow him to the ends of the earth.'

'And your child?'

'Even that couldn't stop me.'

'He's not the person for you, Sorel. Everything you have been brought up to rejects him. In the end he would have destroyed you. He would have taken all your youth, your loveliness, and in the end you would have despised him. Little meannesses would have crept in and so on. You would have begun to notice them; they would have shocked you. Whilst you were still shocked there would have been some spark left in you, but when one morning you found that you were no longer surprised then he would indeed have killed the basic good in you, the real Sorel.'

'Why do you tell me all this when you know it's useless?'

'I've come here to ask you to go back to Luke.'

'Ah! He thinks it's so simple for me,' I thought, 'to go back to Luke and be forgiven.' I searched for Luke in my heart but found only Paul.

'If I went back to Luke it would be betraying Little Willy. I had him because I loved someone beyond all reason. If I give up then there is no point in the child, the reason itself is exploded.'

'Surely you yourself have been betrayed?'

'That's no reason for doing the same thing myself. Applying the same medicine will not cure, only make the wound deeper.'

'But surely the child would benefit if you returned to Luke? He would be accepted by your friends; he would have a father, a background. I think you owe it to him, Sorel.'

'You must let me work this thing out for myself, David.' I went and leant over the balcony. The sun, an orange ball, was pinioned between pink houses.

'You still hope that he will come back.' David's voice was exasperated.

'No, no, I know that he'll never come back. I only know that he was all that made life worth living.'

'I can see that I've come to you too soon.'

'You still think I'll get over it? I wrung my love too hard, David, and though I've nothing left now I can only stop abusing it myself. I can only remain true to myself and my faith. How could I go back to Luke now? How could I pick up the threads of my life, doing the little ordinary things, the ordering of meals, telephoning friends, going to parties, answering invitations, just as though nothing had happened? It would be living a lie. Whenever I looked at Little Willy I should think of his father. Do you think Luke would like that? Amongst my friends I should feel disreputable, an outcast. I should be carrying my falseness into another world.'

'He never deserved such love. Whether I think you right or wrong is beside the point, he was never worth it.'

'Leave me with my own vision of him, David. Only in

that way can I stop it being sordid. I can make it shine in spite of everything.'

'You think now, Sorel, that you will never change. How old are you? Twenty? Twenty-one? In ten years everything will have changed. At the moment you have no idea what tragedies you are storing up for yourself. You need security like everyone else. You too need the ordinary, the prosaic, the safe. What will you feel like when your father finds out, when your friends shun you?'

'I'll have Little Willy.'

'Sorel, in two days I'll return to England. I want you to come with me. The way things are going there is bound to be a war sooner or later in Europe. You and the child would be safer in England. You need not feel bound to go straight back to Luke.'

'Need I remind you that I find this conversation very painful?'

'I'm sorry, but I want you to make a decision. Come on, let's go and find Odette. She must be hovering, terrified of her "little one's" anger.'

We found Odette downstairs in the hall sticking large ferns into a vase. Judging from the drips of water surrounding her she no sooner put them in than she pulled them out again.

'I thought you did the flowers this morning, Odette,' I said guilelessly.

'Let's go and have a bottle of wine, Odette, in that raggy room of yours.'

'How can a busy woman use so many rooms?' She slopped over the courtyard, flapping her heelless sandals.

'Have you been true to me, David?'

'Darling, I never lift my eyes when a woman passes.'

'Silent worship.'

'I dream in French.'

'How terrible to dream in your terrible, terrible French.'

'In my dreams it's perfect, as you yourself, Odette, are perfect in my dreams.'

Tiring of their banter an overwhelming loneliness drove

me down to the quayside. All was quiet, the summer visitors not yet come. Only out at sea, foam, white, whipped like cream, hissed and singed the air. I strolled towards the Café Anglais. Behind glass windows I saw the shining electric coffee urns, the white alpaca coats of waiters, the marble-topped tables thinly sprinkled with humanity. At the Café Anglais there was no one: only a tramp sat outside smelling of filth, covered with a tattered coat, once black, now bottle green with age. His elbows stuck out sharp and angular, the skin flaky, scabrous, through gaping holes. His pockets, holding together his coat from tears running to his shoulders, gaped hopelessly and I imagined him thrusting nicotine fingers searching in their depths for that elusive coin, the stubbed acrid cigarette stub or perhaps a sheet of month-old paper. From his wrist hung a dog's leather lead, its chain end moving on the pavement like a snake's agile head. No dog in sight, the man himself became victim of the lead.

His face stubbled with growth had once been beautiful. The nose was noble and Roman, the lips, now wet with slobber and fringed with hair, were red and sensual. The eyes were vacant of expression: no intelligence shone there, only animal cunning. Long ago a thread had snapped and left them empty windows. In front of him was a table and on it a glass once filled with black coffee, now empty and stained, into which with trembling, nervous fingers he poured cold water, adding sugar grain by grain. Then stirring violently he would sip it like nectar, noisily, with wet smacking of lips.

Filled with pity for one so miserable, one being more hurt by life than myself, I ordered a jug of café au lait to be taken to him. The waiter, disdainful with disapproval—these vagrants should not be encouraged—set it before him, and I watched the amazement creep into his eyes, then disbelief, then greed.* With avaricious haste and furtiveness he encircled the jug, the sugar bowl, the tumbler, with his arms, and gazed, a miser, tears pouring down his face, words incoherent pouring from his lips.

Relieved, I settled back into the corner of the café. Alone I sat amongst the upturned chairs, the iron pedestalled tables, a pane of glass separating me from yet another desolate being.

Dreaming, I sipped my aperitif. Paul sat at my side. I had only to conjure him up to be filled with his presence. Soon he would turn and move his lips against mine. Our lips sensitive, would cling, unable to relinquish the moment. His eyes open, I would see myself, a smaller self reflected.

'*Et Monsieur, où est-il?*' The waiter, remembering, stood over me.

'*En Angleterre.*'

'*Il reviendra bientôt?*' His voice commiserated.

'*J'espère!*' And I smiled my glassy smile.

No comfort here, I thought, no comfort anywhere. And hastily paying I went out, passing the tramp sucking his coffee from the jug spout.

Lights now dotted the quay; shadow merged with substance. A purple cloak was flung over the whole.

Unthinking, I turned towards Paul's flat, then, realizing, I considered and decided to pass it once and then no more. The dusk darkness enveloped me. People passing like shadows lost their identity. Near the building I crossed the road, the better to view the window. My feet dragged, my heart pounded. A light, challenging, made the window gas-orange, unshadowed. I stopped short of the reflected light which bathed the pavement. I could see half the ceiling and walls from where I stood. Across the ceiling, cast by a table lamp a shadow bent, swayed and moved, tantalizing, the outline firm and edged, a man's shadow. Breathlessly I watched. Another shadow, foreshortened, the head long and curved. The two shadows moved round each other like moths. Like shadow boxers they clinched and separated. Suddenly, a laugh, high but secretive, a woman's laugh, rang out. Far away I could hear the murmur of voices as though the panes beat out the sound. One shadow broke and disappeared. A figure silhouetted at the window, gold-edged with light, a man,

but not Paul. Shutters were flung together with eager hands, and again the woman's laugh rang out. A sigh involuntarily escaped me. I turned and trailing my fingers along the rough-hewn wall I made for home.

When David found me I was leaning over Little Willy's cot. I was watching him, his every movement, as though searching for a sign. Sightless, he turned to me, a windy smile clouding his eyes, creasing his mouth. His hair lay yellow, petal-soft on the pillow, the back of his head rubbed and pinkened. Clenching his thumbs, his hands, mauve, mottled, waved in futile haste, until one stopped, was laid on the sheet quite still, and the other at last subsided gently, laid with infinite care, and he slept.

'Come to supper, Sorel.'

'Odette forgot Little Willy's bath.'

'Did you give it him?' I nodded, wondering a little at Odette's philosophy of love.

'It was kind of David to say no more,' I thought, leaving the station. Only at the last moment as I had leapt on to the platform he had leant far out as the train moved off and shouted 'I'll hope for you, Sorel, one day,' as the train tore us apart. I gave him a sad regretful little wave, but the window had already blanked up with darkness.

Odette with eyes pink with weeping was turning out her abused and fuggy room. With violence she was throwing mats over the balcony where they hung like brown bats. Dust rose suffocatingly in a misty cloud. Unmoved for months the furniture was yielding up its cocoon of disuse. Like a pregnant woman Odette was thrown into a fever of activity. 'Pfluff' went her swat on the mats. 'Swish' went the carpet brush. Spiders scurried into shelter as, in one movement, their cobweb homes were swept away. Chairs swung on one runner were tottered like drunken men from place to place. Lace curtains, once white, now dingy grey, lay like waste paper in the centre of the room.

Once dismantled the room would take hours to reassemble. I hoped Odette's mood would last as long.

'I shall never,' said Odette, on her knees, wax-polishing the surrounds, 'see him again.' She sniffed loudly and used the back of her hand.

'Why ever not?' I asked foolishly, standing in the middle of the room.

'There will be a war.' A tear fell and got rubbed into the wood with a blotting-out movement.

'I thought you'd be too sensible to listen to David. He's an alarmist. And, remember, he's a journalist.'

'He speaks the truth.'

'Nonsense.'

'It's not nonsense,' shrilled Odette, leaning back on her heels and wiping her face in the cleaning rag. 'It's only you who are so blind, who are a child, a—a chrysalis, who will not see things as they are. You are not sensible, *pas pratique*. You will not listen to David, who is good and intelligent, who would take care of you. You do not deserve such a man to love.'

She pushed my feet away with her rag impatiently. I looked forlornly down at her.

'But he wants me to go back to Luke,' I said, trying to understand her.

'He only wants the best for you,' muttered Odette, not looking at me. 'He does not want you and Little Willy caught here if there is a war. War, war, war.' Her flesh quivered and she thumped the floor with her palm.

'Please, Odette, don't be angry with me,' I pleaded. 'Please don't.'

She looked up at me and her face softened. It was as though she had been thinking aloud, not directing the artillery of her remarks at me. She rose nimbly and folded me against her plump bosom.

'There, there, Sorel my darling,' she murmured, holding me very tight. 'What have I said to you to make you look so sad? See, Odette is upset. I feel I never see David again. I feel it here.' She thumped her side. 'All young

men, brave, proud young men, will be killed. I, Odette, know.'

• 'Why do you say this?' I said, kissing her gently and feeling for my handkerchief. I was thinking of Paul.

'The cowards escape; it is always the brave who die, the brave and the foolish. You, darling Sorel, are brave in your way. You too will have to be careful.'

'Do *you* want me to go?'

Her voice muffled against my shoulder, she said, 'Only for your own sake, and Little Willy's. You are both like my own children. If I had my way I would give you both to David.' She caressed his name. 'The three people I love most. My dear English people. David says you must go back to Luke. He is a wise man, so perhaps he is right.'

I stroked her cheek. 'Give me a few more weeks, Odette,' I pleaded. 'Let me decide slowly, and when I do don't be disappointed with my decision.'

'Ah, Sorel,' she whispered ruefully. 'My dear obstinate Sorel.'

I could hear her hours later humming softly as she pulled in the mats from the open windows.

With the late April sunshine warming into May, Odette's perusal of the daily papers became more intense. With anxious eyes she raked the columns, looking for something special, some sign. When she had finished she would pass them to me without comment; only her eyes watched me, waiting for reaction. I thought them unnecessarily alarmist, was too self-absorbed to worry. No war would drive me from France. She never spoke of my leaving. When letters arrived from David she thrust them into the bosom of her dress until later she would smudge them with her tears. Once he enclosed a letter from Luke. He only waited for my return. He added that my father was still unwell and inundated him with telephone calls asking

where I was. It was increasingly difficult to keep things from him. I made a mental note to write and explain soon, and then once more let the days slip idly through my hands.

No, it was not a war which eventually drove me into furious activity. When I met the postman at the gate one afternoon he handed me a letter.

'For you, Madame,' he said, smiling. 'There is three francs to pay.' I felt in my pocket for some change and then in my bag. As I did so I turned the envelope over. I must have gone white because the postman stepped forward as though to catch me if I fell! The envelope was addressed in Paul's handwriting. I paid the money in a dream and went quickly to my room. My fingers trembling with haste, I opened the envelope. I was suddenly icy cold and shivery in spite of the blue sky, the golden sun. At the same time knowing I had nothing to lose, I read it rapidly, then once more, slowly. He said:

DARLING,—You'll wonder how I once more found out where you are. I've been a very long time finding out. I hoped against hope that I would hear from you, that you would let me know whether we had a boy or a girl. I know I deserved your silence.

I yearn to see both of you, my darling, to look once more at you and at 'ours'. When you receive this letter I will already be on my way to you by a circuitous route, and will arrive two days after you get it. We can decide then how long I shall stay. I love you, darling, so much.

PAUL.

I went and picked Little Willy out of his cot and danced him in my arms round the room. I hugged him close and whispered, 'Your father is coming to see you at last. Oh! Darling, isn't it wonderful? Paul, your father.' He blew mucous bubbles at me and gurgled with joy, his woollen-clad feet kicked out helplessly behind him. I felt as though flood-gates of joy had suddenly opened. I flung open my

windows and went on to the balcony. I thought, 'What a beautiful, beautiful world!' I fetched my letter and held it in front of Little Willy. 'Your father's writing,' I murmured into his neck. Seeing the envelope again I noticed that it had arrived in St. Tropez the day before. It had been held up because it was insufficiently stamped. I thought, 'He might arrive to-morrow evening.' My happiness seemed too much for one person. I wanted to run and tell Odette, but waited, treasuring the moment. 'To-morrow he will see Little Willy,' I thought. 'To-morrow he will bend over the cot and see his son. He won't touch me when he comes in, but will go straight to the cot. Later the back of his hand will brush mine and we will be terribly, frighteningly conscious of each other. Then and only then will he take me in his arms and ask my forgiveness, and I will be speechless, tongue-tied with love. After that we will make plans for the future.' The future! I could not imagine anything else clearly, only his coming, but not the future, nor our being together for always.

I went over to where I had thrown my handbag and opening it I took out another letter, another letter from Paul, earmarked with fingering.

'Work in trying to create something, some little truth out of one's own experience, and others which one can pass on,' I read. There, I thought, I have the truth in his own words. I read the whole hurtful letter again for what might well have been the millionth time.

'Because I believe it would be wrong to go on not being "everything" to each other I am writing . . .'

I remembered reading it for the first time and how I felt then. I looked at the letter I had just received. Was it insulting?

Going slowly downstairs I found Odette feeding her parrot.

'Darling,' she said, eyeing me through the bars of the cage. 'You look as though you had seen a ghost.'

'Odette, I'm going home.'

'When, darling?'

'I'm going to-morrow.'

Odette scattered sunflower seeds on to the floor and scanned my face.

'You'll never get a seat, darling. Wait a day or two, or book for next week.'

'I'll go whether I get a seat or not,' I said loudly.

Odette looked at the open letters in my hand.

'I'll come and help you pack, darling. There are such a lot of Little Willy's things and you pack so badly.'

She put her arm round my waist and led me up the stairs.

'I wonder what you'll really call him?'

'Little Willy?' I asked, trying to smile. 'I think Luke will have to decide.'

'Oh,' said Odette disbelievingly.

Weak now as though recovering from a very long illness, I spurred myself into activity, my whole body and spirit crying out to be laid to rest, as though the burden of my decision were too great for them to bear. I felt action was needed before I dissolved with the world around me.

'I'll go to the station for the tickets,' I told Odette. I wanted only to keep moving until the moment of my departure. Only thus would it be bearable. Odette had already emptied drawers in neat array on to the bed. If her eyes were becoming pink I pretended not to notice. Her loud sniff followed me out of the room.

As I reached the top of the stairs I heard a step in the hall, loud and firm. Heard Odette speaking to Little Willy, and the banging of suitcases. Below me someone began to speak and paused, looking up, as I too hesitated and looked down. 'It's Paul,' I thought. 'He's come.' And as he let his coat slide to the ground, dropping his suitcase, I went down the staircase towards him, heard him say my name wonderingly as he took me in his arms.